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Boundaries shown on this map are those of the Republic of Belarus, and do not include the entire Belarusian ethnic territory parts of which extend into neighboring states.

EDITOR'S DESK

The West Pressuring Belarus

It looks like the year 2000 might be the year in which Belarus' destiny will be finally determined one way or another. One way would be to become a free and independent democratic country and a member of the world community; the other, the country would be absorbed by Russia.

Presently, the country is in turmoil. It has two competing constitutions. One was democratically adopted in 1994 and is recognized by most Western governments and the Belarusian opposition. This constitution limits the presidential term in office to five years, which expired last July, making Łukašenka's rule illegitimate. The second constitution was devised by President Łukašenka via a fraudulent referendum in 1996. This constitution enlarged the presidential powers and extended Łukašenka's term in office to 2001. The Western powers declared the referendum illegal and that all subsequent actions of the government institutions deriving their power from the 1996 constitution were null and void. This also raised the question of the legitimacy of the Russia-Belarus union treaty signed last December in Moscow by Łukašenka and ratified post-haste by his handpicked parliament.

Belarus has twice declared its independence from Russia. The first time - a short-lived one - was in 1918 following the collapse of the Russian empire and the second time - now under threat - was in 1991 on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet empire. Following the USSR's final demise in December 1991 (symbolized by the Biełavieža Declaration of December 8, 1991, signed by Belarus, Russia and Ukraine), most countries recognized Belarus as a free, independent and sovereign state. During those first three years of independence there were high hopes that democracy would prevail in Belarus. A new constitution adopted in 1994 guaranteed a democratic form of government and the country's first president was democratically elected.

But the hopes were premature. The new president was anything but a fan of democratic transformation in Belarus or of keeping Belarus out of the Russian sphere of influence. Just the opposite: he became a virtual dictator, turned the country into a police state, restored a quasi-communist order in his own country and embarked on reestablishing the old Soviet Union, using Belarus as a bargaining chip for securing a place in the Kremlin for himself.

To help resolve the constitutional crisis, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), of which Belarus is a member, offered its good services to bring the government and opposition together for a dialogue. The purpose of the dialogue was seen as a means to have the government and the opposition work out the requirements for a fair and free parliamentary election due next fall, to be followed by presidential elections next year. While the opposition reluctantly agreed to the talks if certain preconditions were met by the government, the government has been changing its position by first accepting some of the agreements then reneging on others. To complicate the process, Łukašenka stated that it is for him to

define the makeup of the opposition with whom he would negotiate and ordered a new electoral law be prepared without any input from the opposition and in disregard of the OSCE guidelines. So the dialogue process seems to be going nowhere.

Not all people agree with the direction the country has been heading. The opposition, an assemblage of dedicated nationalists, disgruntled former bureaucrats, and people in between, challenged the president by staging a series of demonstrations in the streets. The events occurred on the Constitution Day (March 15), Independence Day (March 25), Chernobyl Disaster Day (April 26), All Saints'/Kurapaty Day (November 2) and a few others - all off the official government list of holidays. Planned initially as peaceful protest events, frequently such events turned into bloody encounters with security forces.

Last year, in October, things got ugly. The opposition staged an unauthorized demonstration in support of the OSCE-sponsored dialogue. The demonstrators also demanded that the government respect human rights and terminate the union with Russia. Some 20,000 people turned out. There were many clashes with riot police in which about 150 people were injured and over 90 arrested. The president blamed the West, accusing it of sponsoring and financing the event. The U.S. responded by condemning the violent suppression of the march.

Next came a Freedom March on March 15 to mark the adoption of the 1994 constitution. A permit from the City of Miensk was secured. About 20,000 people braved freezing rain to march peacefully through the capital demanding a government-opposition dialogue and fair parliamentary elections. They also were protesting the treaty providing for a union between Belarus and Russia. There was no interference from the police.

Then came the 82nd anniversary of the declaration of independence (in 1918) on March 25. The opposition sought but failed to get a permit authorizing a march within the city; it was limited it to an outlying district instead. To prevent opposition groups from assembling in the city center, helmeted riot police and interior ministry troops ringed the city's central square. As the crowds started to show up, police and troops savagely beat the protesters and detained over 400 people, including foreign observers, parliamentarians, human rights leaders and 28 reporters and TV crews. Russian President elect Putin interceded on behalf of the detained Russians and a Moscow radio station reported that public unrest in Belarus was getting stronger. Meanwhile, about 10,000 people assembled at the government-sanctioned area outside the city. Before the event, the U.S. State Department issued a warning calling for Łukašenka to exercise restraint or face greater isolation from Western Europe and America. Łukašenka responded by saying his riot police will "beat the stuffing out of any protesters who get out of line."

So what is next? Opposition leaders have announced a series of rallies this spring to protest Łukašenka's autocratic rule and his plans to merge Belarus with Russia. They want to have talks with the president to ensure that parliamentary elections late this year are free and fair.

After nine years of neglect, the West finally has realized that the Belarusian problem won't go away. The Europeans came forward with the idea of a soft solution to a seemingly unsolvable problem: a round-table discussion between the opposition and the government. The United States felt the Łukašenka needed a little more prodding. To increase the pressure, the Department of State became more vocal lately by criticizing Łukašenka's behavior. The next move was a meeting in February between the deputy secretary of state and the exiled speaker of the legal Belarusian parliament. This was followed by a congressional hearing on the situation in Belarus in early March conducted by the Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The Belarusian speaker and two parliamentary colleagues, and ranking officials from the Department of State and the OSCE testified as witnesses. The Belarusian diaspora also became more active by picketing Belarusian, and sometimes Russian, embassies in Brussels, London, Paris, Warsaw, Vilnius, Prague, Ottawa and Washington.

Belarus needs a large, strong and united opposition and a lot of support from the democratic world. Therefore, we applaud the recent *Washington Post* editorial saying: "What's clear is that U.S. and European governments need to step up both pressure on Mr. Lukashenko and support, material and moral, for Belarus's democrats — while making greater freedom there an issue in diplomacy with Mr. Putin's government." Without such action, the question of free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections in Belarus will remain problematic. Feeling safe and secure under the protection of Russia, Łukašenka is not going to design his own demise.

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Joe Price, Editor

FEATURES

U.S. State Department Annual Report on Human Rights in Belarus

On February 25, 2000, the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, released its Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in 1999. The report on Belarus, over 18,000 words in size, notes numerous abuses of Belarusians' individual, political, and civil rights with a conclusion that the Belarusian government's human rights record worsened significantly in 1999.

The report consists of six sections addressing the following subjects: Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person; Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties; Section 3. Respect for Political Rights: Section 4. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights; Section 5. Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status; Section 6. Workers' Rights.

Following is an excerpt from Ambassador Daniel Speckhard's remarks given at the presentation of the report at the U.S. Embassy in Minsk on February 28.

" . . . I'd like to start by saying that Human Rights Report is not a political document. It focuses on human rights that are recognized around the world by the international community. Belarus has recognized this as signatory to the UN Declaration on Human Rights, to the Copenhagen document, and as a member of the OSCE. The human rights that are codified in these documents are the subject of this report. These basic human rights include the freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and association, protection from arbitrary arrest and detention, the freedom for labor to

organize, freedom from harassment by authorities, and many others.

Outside observers can identify problems but the solutions need to be realized by Belarusians. While the responsibility to correct many of the human rights problems identified in this report and by other international organizations rests with the Government of Belarus, improving the rights in Belarus is the task for all society. It's important to infuse these fundamental principles in hearts and minds of all Belarusians and the citizens of the world. Schools and community organizations are important mechanisms for achieving this.

Improving human rights is something not only for Belarus to work on. This is something that all countries need to constantly strive to improve. Even in the United States, we are constantly aware of the need to develop and further protect and preserve human rights.

"I'd also like to say that this report highlights that the Government of Belarus is falling seve rely short of meeting even minimal standards and, up to this point, has not demonstrated the political will to improve the situation. According to the report, the Government of Belarus has shown a disregard for rights and freedoms of its citizens. Why should all Belarusians care about this? For those who perhaps don't feel the personal impact of human rights abuse, I'll make the plea to think about economic factors and problems. Because there's not only a moral argument to protect human rights, there is also an economic argument. I have met with many Belarusians over the last three years and I have been impressed by their intellectual capacity, talents, energy and their abilities. It's important that these talents be unleashed by the society so that they can work towards improving the economic and the political situation in Belarus. Each individual is important in Belarusian society and the ability of these individuals to help the country develop economically and politically needs to be allowed. Belarusians need to be allowed to tap the creative energy of all its individuals to be able to meet the significant challenges it faces as it makes the transition to a democracy and market economy.

"I also want to say a few words about the development of democracy in Belarus. The way forward has been identified by Belarusians over the last six months with the help of the OSCE. Specifically, this is through free and fair elections, access to media, strengthening of checks and balances between branches of government, and creating an environment of respect for basic human rights, including ending harassment of opposition parties, independent newspapers, non-governmental organizations, and releasing political detainees. The United States is disappointed that there hasn't been more progress over the last six months in these areas. We view the recent signals from the government to resume dialogue with the help of OSCE as a welcome sign. It's important for the government to understand the urgency of this task and to begin the genuine dialogue with the good offices of the OSCE. It is important for the government to be open to accepting the criticism and observations of this report and reports of other international organizations to address human rights shortcomings in Belarus. As I said, it's up to Belarusians to solve the problems of their society. And as you tackle the challenges of promoting human rights in your country, I want you to know that the hearts and prayers of the American people are with you."

Following is the background and summary of the report:

"Belarus has a government in which nearly all power is concentrated in the hands of the President. Since his election in July 1994 to a 5-year term as the country's first President, Alexandr Lukashenko has consolidated power steadily in the executive branch through authoritarian means. He used a November 1996 referendum to amend the 1994 Constitution in order to broaden his powers and extend his term in office. The President ignored the then-Constitutional Court's ruling that the Constitution could not be amended by referendum. As a result, the current political system is based on the 1996 Constitution, which was adopted in an unconstitutional manner. Most members of the international community criticized the flawed referendum and do not recognize the legitimacy of the 1996 Constitution, legislature, or Alexandr Lukashenko's continuation in office beyond the legal expiration of his term in July. Although the amended Constitution provides for a formal separation of powers, the President dominates all other branches of government. The current acting legislature was not elected directly, but was created out of the remnants of the former Parliament, which Lukashenko disbanded soon after the 1996 referendum. The Constitution limits the legislature to meeting twice per year for no more than a total of 170 days. Presidential decrees made when the legislature is out of session have the force of law, except - in theory - in those cases restricted by the 1996 Constitution. The 1996 Constitution also allows the President to issue decrees having the force of law in circumstances of "specific necessity and urgency," a provision that President Lukashenko has interpreted broadly. The judiciary is not independent.

"Law enforcement and internal security responsibilities are shared by the Committee for State Security (KGB) and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), both of which answer directly to the President. Civilian authorities do not maintain effective control of the security forces. Under President Lukashenko's direction, the Presidential Guard - initially created to protect senior officials - continued to act against the President's political enemies with no judicial or legislative oversight. On May 25, the Law on the State Guard officially entered into force. The law, which already had been operative on a de facto basis for a number of years, gives the President the right to subordinate all security bodies to his personal command. Members of the security forces committed numerous human rights abuses.

"The country's political leadership opposes any significant economic reforms and remains committed ideologically to a planned economy. Government officials claimed that the gross domestic product (GDP) grew during the first 6 months of the year by 3 percent, but most independent analysts agree that any growth that has occurred was the result principally of continued massive credits to the debt-ridden state sector. Discriminatory foreign exchange controls have contributed to sharp declines in foreign trade and investment. Both exports and imports continued to fall given the country's growing isolation from world and regional trade flows. Foreign investment fell by 42 percent to $30 million during the first 6 months of the year. Per capita GDP remained constant at approximately $1,100, but in reality was probably much lower. Leading exports are trucks, tractors, chemical fertilizers, and fibers. The majority of workers are employed in the state industrial and agricultural sectors. Although the unreliability of official statistics makes it difficult to assess accurately economic conditions, living standards for many segments of society continued to decline. Annual inflation was over 350 percent. Following a doubling by the Government on May 1, average monthly wages stood at approximately $40 at mid-year. Residents of small towns and rural areas, where incomes are particularly low and wage arrears more prevalent, sustain themselves through unreported economic activity and small gardens.

"The Government's human rights record worsened significantly. The Government severely limits the right of citizens to change their government, and the President took severe measures to neutralize a large-scale public campaign

initiated by opposition leaders to draw attention to the expiration of his legal term in office on July 20. Well-known political figures disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Security forces continued to beat political opponents and detainees. There were reports of severe hazing in military units during the year. Prison conditions remained poor. Security forces arbitrarily arrested and detained citizens, and the number of apparently politically motivated arrests increased, although most of those arrested soon were released. Prolonged detention and delays in trials were common and also occurred in a number of politically sensitive cases. Although one political prisoner was released, at least one other individual whose conviction human rights groups believe was politically motivated remains incarcerated. The security services infringed on citizens' privacy rights and monitored closely the activities of opposition politicians and other segments of the population. Restrictions on freedom of speech, the press, and peaceful assembly continued, and the Government did not respect freedom of association. The Government continued to impose limits on freedom of religion, and restricted freedom of movement. Government security agents monitored closely human rights monitors and hindered their efforts. Domestic violence and discrimination against women remained significant problems. Societal anti-Semitism persists. Authorities continued to restrict workers' rights to associate freely, organize, and bargain."

The full report can be found at the following web address: http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1999_hrp_report/belarus.html

Helsinki Commission Hearing on Belarus Focuses on Human Rights Violations and Russia-Belarus Union

By Orest Deychakiwsky

"Lukashenka's regime continues to clench the reigns of power, stifling fundamental freedoms and violating the human rights of Belarusian citizens," said Rep. Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ), Chairman of the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission), at a March 9 hearing "Belarus — Stalled at the Crossroads." "It has refused to engage in meaningful dialogue with the opposition. He has paid lip service to dialogue, or has used the tactics of delay and obfuscation, reminiscent of the communist past. Unless Lukashenka begins an honest dialogue with the opposition, ends police repression, allows freedom of the media and reforms the electoral process, Belarus will never rise to meet the basic human rights standards iterated in the Helsinki Documents and cease being a pariah in the European community," said Smith. Chairman Smith also expressed growing concern about the Russia - Belarus Union: "How can one talk about a Union when a mockery is made of democratic processes ...can a genuine debate exist under these circumstances? Can you speak of a Union when the decks are stacked against those who deeply care about Belarus' independence, and when the head of the country actively works against open debate on the subject? A momentous decision such as whether or not to unify with another country, with all the implications for Belarus' sovereignty, should - as perhaps no other decision - reflect the genuine will of the people. "

At the hearing, prominent witnesses criticized the Lukashenka regime, focusing on the deterioration of human rights and democracy in Belarus, as well as the implications of the Belarus-Russia Union treaty on Belarus' existence as an independent state. They also called for meaningful dialogue between the Belarusian Government and the opposition, and free and fair parliamentary elections as a way out of Belarus' current constitutional crisis.

Testifying were Harold Koh, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor and a Helsinki Commissioner; Ross Wilson, Principal Deputy to the Ambassador-at Large and Special Advisor to the Secretary of State for the New Independent States; Semyon Sharetskiy, Speaker of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus illegally disbanded by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in 1996; Stanislau Shushkevich, independent Belarus' first head of state; Anatoly Lebedka, chair of the Commission for International Affairs of the 13th Supreme Soviet; and former Romanian Foreign Minister Adrian Severin, head of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's Working Group on Belarus.

Assistant Secretary Koh, who characterized the situation in Belarus as having markedly deteriorated since the spring of 1999, when the Commission held its last hearing on Belarus, stated: "Democratic legitimacy in Belarus can only be restored through free and fair elections in which all citizens and candidates can participate on an equal basis and by restoring the necessary checks and balances among the branches of government. The Lukashenka regime 's recent announcement of plans to resume the OSCE - sponso red dialogue with the opposition must not impose preconditions that will make it impossible for the opposition to participate. It instead must produce real results, including agreement on an electoral code that meetings OSCE standards and provides an internationally acceptable framework for legitimate, free and fair parliamentary elections. Otherwise, the U.S. and other democracies will find it very difficult if not impossible to recognize the parliamentary elections planned for later this year as legitimate, and Belarus will not resolve its political and constitutional crisis or end its self-imposed isolation." Mr.Wilson of the State Department noted that U.S. policy was the same for Belarus as for the rest of the states of the former Soviet Union. "We support Belarus' sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, as well as its market democratic transformation and integration among the broader trans-Atlantic community of nations. "As we look to Belarus' future, we see one new concern looming, and that is the prospect that the Lukashenka regime could mortgage his country's independence to Russia. The Administration's policy on integration among the former Soviet states is that it must be voluntary, mutually beneficial and erect no new external barriers. The breakdown of democracy has made a voluntary decision by the Belarusian people impossible." Mr Wilson added: " The United States is maintaining a pol icy of selective engagement with the regime in Miensk, with no direct assistance, emphasizing our call for allowing peaceful demonstrations and resumption of dialogue with the opposition, showing support for democratic leaders and the OSCE 's Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG), and restating our readiness to work with a Belarus that honestly elects its leaders and cooperates with its neighbors."

Supreme Soviet Speaker Sharetski, who currently resides in Lithuania out of concerns for his safety,

asserted: "The majority of the population in Belarus does not support Lukashenka. It is only the all-around support by Russia of the Lukashenka regime which enables the dictator to disrespect the constitution of the Republic of Belarus and flagrantly violate the laws and liberties of people, in disregard of appeals by international organizations and parliaments of democratic countries for the Belarusian Government to return to a lawful sphere and start real negotiations with the representatives of the democratic opposition.

The independence of Belarus and the preservation of its sovereignty, its return to a democratic way of development, and its joining of European structures, is not only necessary for the creation of normal living conditions for the ten-million Belarusian people who are European in their mindset, but it is also necessary in order to guarantee the security of our neighbors and all of Europe - understanding that the problems of Belarus should be solved by the Belarusians themselves."

Stanislau Shushkevich, who together with Boris Yeltsin and Leonid Kravchuk terminated the Soviet Union through the creation of the CIS in December 1991, observed: "Supporters of Belarusian independence are not enemies of Russia. They understand that Russia is more democratic than Belarus is today and that Russia's economy is more liberal. But they also realize that to follow the path of reforms together with an unpredictable Russia is similar to that of following a herd of horses, speeding along without knowing where they might turn next. Russia does not conceal its intentions that it wants to swallow Belarus under the guise of 'unification.' The Russian Federation Council on Foreign and Defense Policy declared openly that the unification must be used 'to oppose the expansion of NATO to the East.'

Leading democratic opposition member Anatoly Lebedka warned of possible Lukashenka tactics in negotiation with the opposition : "Different, diametrically opposed approaches to solving the Belarus problem have collided. The OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the opposition suggest playing chess using the well-established and generally recognized rules. The Lukashenka regime, sweeping the figures off the board, prefers to use it for smacking its opponent on the head. In fact, it has unilaterally stopped consultations on starting a negotiating process. Declarations and promises of the Belarusian authorities are not worth the paper they were written on. " Referring to the planned parliamentary elections, Lebedka stated: "If the regime persists in playing the role of a deaf mute, the reaction of the world community must be appropriate. In this situation, an election that is not a consequence of negotiation and compromise, but that is held under deliberately unequal and discriminatory conditions, cannot be recognized as democratic and legitimate. The U.S., in coalition with the European Union, is capable of effectively influencing the situation in Belarus, using possibilities offered by Russia for this purpose. The allocation of financial assistance to Russia should be considered in conjunction with the human rights situation in Belarus. The protection of human rights must remain one of the priorities of Western foreign policy."

Adrian Severin of the OSCE PA concluded: "The current situation in Belarus does not give much reason for enthusiasm in that. There have been a number of setbacks to the democratization process and to the efforts of the OSCE ...to create an inclusive political dialogue on elections. The date for these elections is drawing near with many necessary issues yet to be resolved. However, some hope still remains. The government has recognized the need for a national dialogue and has instituted its own process. The opposition has expressed a willingness to participate in any meaningful dialogue which will work towards the resolution of their differences with the government. Whereas confidence and trust are still lacking in this new process, it is imperative that all sides try to make the effort a successful one. " However, he cautioned: "The key issue is that time is short and much needs to be done in order for free, fair and recognizable elections to take place in Belarus this year." One of the expectations raised during the hearing was that during the planned March 15 opposition-staged "Freedom March 2", there will not be a repeat of the event s of last October's Freedom March in which some demonstrators were beaten, and that the rights to freedom of assembly will be unequivocally respected. (On March 9, following discussions with the organizers of the demonstration, the Miensk city government sanctioned "Freedom March 2")

In addition to Rep. Smith, attending the hearing were Commissioner Rep. Joseph R. Pitts (R-PA); Rep. Alcee L. Hastings (D-FL), Vice-Chairman of the First Committee of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) Parliamentary Assembly ; Rep. Sam Gejdenson (D-CT), Ranking Member of the U.S. House International Relations Committee; and R. Spencer Oliver, Secretary General, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. U.S. House Majority Leader Rep. Dick Armey (R-TX) offered his encouragement to the Belarusian opposition in a brief discussion at the hearing.

NOTE: Copies of the hearing statements are available on the Commission website at **http://www.house.gov/csce/** or by phoning (202) 225-1901.

Orest Deychakiwsky is a Staff Advisor to the Helsinki Commission, who was responsible for coordinating preparations for the hearing.

Following are written statements by the speaker of the 13th Belarusian Supreme Soviet, Siamion Sharetski, and the former speaker of the 12th Supreme Soviet and the first head of state of the independent Belarus, Stanislau Shushkevich.

STATEMENT BY SIAMION SHARETSKI

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commisssion:

First of all, I wish to express my deep gratitude to your country, the most powerful in the world and a paragon of democracy for others, for its concern with the cause of human rights in other regions of the globe and, in particular, in our country. We view the present hearing in precisely this way. We very much need and appreciate all of this, because Belarus has become, since November 1996, a kind of testing ground for experimentation aimed at the restoration of the former totalitarian Bolshevik order on post-Soviet territory.

A previous session of the Supreme Council (Soviet) of the Republic of Belarus, well aware that the defense of human rights in each country must be valued not only from the national viewpoint, but also on an international level, brought its laws into conformity with international standards and norms and devised mechanisms for their execution. First of all, these requirements were taken into account during the preparation of the Constitution and its adoption on March 15, 1994. Moreover, from the beginning of the Republic of Belarus to November 1996, *much was done to democratize the system* of government in practical terms. Increasingly, Belarus was striving not only to be become independent and sovereign, but also to be an equal member among the European structures.

These developments were in no way acceptable, first of all,

to the communist elite. The programs of the communist parties, at least those of the Russian Federation, Belarus, and Ukraine, envision as one of their mains tasks the renewal of the Soviet Union, with its militaristic ways. Secondly, independence and democracy-building in Belarus were unacceptable to Russia's chauvinist circles, who continue dreaming about the renewal of the Russian empire, whose successor was the Soviet Union. And, in this respect, the programs and actions of all Russian politicians, no matter of what hew or color, coincide. Generally speaking, where international matters are at play, there end the democratic tendencies of all Russian politicians. This was demonstrated by the events in Yugoslavia; this is evident from their attitude toward the settlement of the Chechen problem; and this is exemplified by their views on the independence and sovereignty of the Belarusan state. In all such cases, Russian politicians are guided only by their own imperial interests.

Unfortunately, another example of the same type is exhibited by the presidential nominee of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, who uses Russia's strategic interests in Belarus as an argument for the necessity to unite Belarus and Russia. At the same time, he does not even intend to ask Belarusans: what are their own strategic interests. A while ago, on Russian television screens Belarus was described as the Russian corridor into Europe. Incidentally, Russia does not pay a single kopeck to Belarus, either for the oil and gas pipes which cross our territory, or for the railroads and air space, or for the maintenance of its military installations. Namely, here lies one of the main reasons why the attempt to restore the former Russian empire starts with Belarus. Russia remains an empire, as demonstrated by the events in Chechnya, on whose territory an imperial policy is being conducted. I do not refer here to the fight against terrorism. Such a battle, indeed the most aggressive, must be waged. I have in mind the satisfaction with which the Russian military and journalists report, for example, about the opening in Chechnya of Russian schools in which the Chechen language is taught only as a subject. I would especially like to stress this point, because on the territory of Belarus, there are no terrorists who would threaten Russia or its citizens. Nevertheless and unfortunately, Russians, who occupy the most important positions in the Lukashenka government (now including prime minister), conduct the same spiritual genocide, or, to use a phrase from Russian soldiers, there is an ongoing cleansing of Chechnya from Chechens and Belarus from Belarusans.

Presently, in Belarus, there is not a single higher educational institution functioning in the Belarusan language, and not a single Belarusan school remains in the capital of Minsk (there are only a few Belarusan-language classes). The Belarusan language has been eliminated from all government offices, despite the fact that, in the territory of the Republic, as the 1999 census has shown, over 80 percent of the population are of Belarusan nationality. This means that the policy I mentioned constitutes a violation of the main nationality's basic constitutional right to use its native language, let alone that it fails to satisfy the needs of Poles, Ukrainians, Jews and other national minorities. Everyone is being forcibly converted into a Russian.

The first step toward the renewal in Belarus of the old totalitarian system, with its crude socialism and annexation of the Republic to Russia, was the removal of Stanislau Shushkevich from the position of Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus. At the time, this was presumed to have been done to facilitate the presidential candidacy of Vyachaslau Kebich, who headed the government. However, the fact that the podium of Russia's State Duma, which at the time was dominated by communists, was given only to Lukashenka, one of six presidential candidates in Belarus, clearly showed who enjoyed the support of Russia in that presidential contest. Lukashenka was also supported by the Russian leadership as its henchman during the coup d'etat that he carried out in November 1996, under the guise of a national referendum.

However, one cannot correctly label as a referendum, an undertaking which was carried out by bringing to Minsk more troops than the city had seen since the end of the Second World War. Armored cars were put on the streets of the city and the building of the Central Electoral Commission was occupied by armed presidential guardsmen who refused entry to anyone, thus creating every opportunity to blatantly falsify the results of the referendum. Voting bulletins were printed and distributed to localities by presidential teams, without any control. Incidentally, the bulletins contained a note stating that the submitted proposals regarding the amendments to the constitution were of a consultative nature, to be considered by the Supreme Council. After the referendum, L Lukashenka decreed its results to be mandatory as to all proposals. Also, thousands of violations of law were committed during the voting process in the various localities, and this was documented. I myself forwarded to the Republic's Attorney General, documents on more than one thousand such infringements, but no reply was ever received.

The fact that a number of KGB officials were awarded personalized arms and other rewards for a "successful" organization of the so-called referendum (1996) testifies that coercion was committed.

All these facts were well known to the leadership of the Russian Federation, including Messrs. Yeltsin, Chernomyrdin, Stroyev and Seleznev. As to Yeltsin personally, he agreed to dissolve the Soviet Union not because he became such a democrat, ready to assist other peoples in establishing their own national states on the basis of the former Soviet republics, but because only through such a maneuver did he see a real chance to gain supreme power, at least in Russia itself. At that time, there was no way whatsoever for him to become president of the Soviet Union. However, after he was elected president of the Russian Federation, Yeltsin was no longer reluctant to start restoring the former Russian empire. And in this respect his strivings coincided with those of the communists. This is exactly why he supported Lukashenka.

Russian chauvinist circles need the dictator Lukashenka, who by anti-constitutional means paralyzed the functioning of Belarus's democratic organs -- the Supreme Council and the Constitutional Court --which stood firmly for preservation of independence and national sovereignty for the Republic of Belarus and for furtherance of market economy reforms. They needed a dictator in Belarus who would not be a Belarusan in his mentality and thus, would contribute to further the russification of the Belarusan people which had started under the tsars and continued during Soviet times. They also must have a dictatorial regime in Belarus which can establish a monopoly over the mass media and suppress dissent in order to remove obstacles along the road of their chauvinist policy. To create conditions for carrying out such a policy, Russian chauvinist circles are ready not only to close their eyes to the flagrant violations of human rights and liberties in Belarus by the Lukashenka regime, but also to forgive the dictator for the offenses he has been allowing himself toward Yeltsin and other Russian politicians, as well as Russia as a whole.

Since the so-called referendum of November 1996, all division of power in Belarus has been eliminated. All branches of government - legislative, executive, and judicial - are in the hands of Lukashenka. Instead of the Supreme Council, elected by the people, he created the entirely illegitimate National Assembly, which by its nature and competency is similar to the former fascist council which existed under the dictatorship

of Mussolini. All categories of prosecutors and judges are appointed and dismissed by Lukashenka only. Relationships in society, including in the sphere of human rights, have been regulated by decrees and directives, or simply by oral orders of Lukashenka. His decrees revoked many laws that had previously been adopted. A powerful police force has been set up - there are 135,000 policemen to be supported by a population of ten million. Moreover, he created by decree an anti-constitutional paramilitary force and empowered it to disregard essentially any right or law. According to that decree, this organization has the right to break into any domicile and search it without any warrant from a judge or a ministry of justice ministry official, as well as to arrest any individual on its own decision. The lawlessness has reached such a point that, under arrest and now in prison, in violation of their constitutional rights, are Supreme Council deputies Uladzimir Kudzinau (Vladimir Kudinov) and Andrei Klimau (Klimov), the latter of whom was up recently beaten. A show trial is currently being conducted against former prime minister Mikhail Chyhir (Chigir), who refused support to Lukashenka before the November 1996 referendum. No one among the authorities will provide an answer as to where the following have disappeared: former minister of the interior Yury Zakharenka, First Deputy of the Supreme Council Viktar Hanchar (Gonchar), and businessman Anatol Krasouski.

Along with the state budget, which, by the way, the above-mentioned National Assembly literally approves within few hours, Lukashenka has his own budget which is beyond oversight, and which is replenished in part by criminal means, including uncontrolled selling of arms. The government has not only monopolized the electronic mass media and over 90 percent of the print media, but practically prohibits mass meetings and assemblies, as well as strictly controlling the activities of all political and social organizations.

Esteemed ladies and gentlemen!

The presidential term of Alaksandar Lukashenka expired on July 20, 1999. On December 1, 1999, the Attorney General of the Republic of Belarus launched a criminal inquiry into the seizure and holding of power by unconstitutional means. Presently, the investigation continues. All this gives us grounds to state that the signatures of Lukashenka on official documents after the above-mentioned date have no juridical validity. Indeed, I made such a statement on the eve of the signing by Lukashenka and Yeltsin of the so-called treaty on unification of Belarus and Russia into one state.

The majority of the population in Belarus as of now does not support Lukashenka. It is only the all-around support by Russia of the Lukashenka regime which enables the dictator to disrespect the constitution of the Republic of Belarus and flagrantly violate the laws and liberties of people, in disregard of appeals by international organizations and parliaments of democratic countries for the Belarusan government to return to a lawful sphere and start real negotiations with the representatives of the democratic opposition.

Instead of creating conditions for real negotiations with the opposition, with participation by OSCE representatives, whose present position and work we fully support and highly appreciate (although we occasionally polemicize with them), Lukashenka attempts to introduce new phony proposals that only complicate and aggravate the situation in the Republic. But then, this is understandable, inasmuch as he nowadays has support only from groups created and financed by him only to subvert the genuine opposition.

As to the aforementioned treaty, it should be noted that less than five percent of the Republic's population supports annexation of Belarus to Russia. By the way, over 500,000 people have said that if, God forbid, this should happen, they will be ready to leave the country and seek settlement in the West. This is why we consider any attempt by the Russian leadership to annex Belarus as an aggression against our country, with all the consequences that it entails. And here we count on the support of international organizations and the world's democratic countries, the more so because, when Belarus decided to give up her nuclear arms in 1994, the United States, Great Britain, and Russia guaranteed the security and integrity of the Republic of Belarus as an independent state. Today, one of these countries is infringing upon that guarantee. In connection with this I wrote a letter to the President of the United States -- Bill Clinton, Prime Minister of Great Britain --Tony Blair and the former President of Russia -- Boris Yeltsin. Regretfully, none of them responded. In the case of Mr. Yeltsin, everything is understandable. But how should we understand the other two? Incidentally, following their silence, my appeal to them was published in some Belarusan newspapers. So now, a reply from high places is being awaited by the entire Belarusan population, who hope that they were not misled in 1994.

As to the issue of Moscow's conspiracy against Belarus, a particular concern has been caused by the Theses of the Council on Foreign and Security Policy of Russia, published in Russian newspapers in connection with the Russian-Belarusan integration. In those Theses, inter alia, the following has been stated: "As a result of the integration with Belarus, Russia gains a series of undeniable geopolitical advantages...," including "an increase in military possibilities in the sphere of conventional arms as a result of the integration with the Belarusan army, which possesses a high degree of military capabilities, and the emergence of the Kaliningrad special defense region from strategic isolation." Further, it was stated even more clearly that, "the unification of Armed Forces of the two countries significantly strengthens the grouping, especially ground forces, in the region and does not require restructuring of the system of leadership of the united armies."

In light of the statements quoted above, the only question remaining is: what advantages from this integration are there for Belarus, which has many times been victimized by Russia's chauvinist policy?

If, God forbid, Belarus should be annexed to Russia, then a seven-hundred-kilometer-deep wedge will be driven into Europe and this wedge will become, as follows from the above-mentioned document, Russia's military forefront. And then, one more question becomes paramount: how will the Kaliningrad special defense region be able to emerge from isolation? Belarus, to be sure, does not border on the Kaliningrad region. Or are there some further steps planned, at which we now can only guess?

It follows from what I have said here, that the independence of Belarus and the preservation of its sovereignty, its return to a democratic way of development, and its joining of European structures, is not only necessary for the creation of normal living conditions for the ten-million Belarusan people who are European in their mindset, but it is also necessary in order to guarantee the security of our neighbors and all of Europe. Understanding that the problems of Belarus should be solved by the Belarusans themselves, I nevertheless hope hope that today's hearing will serve as one more reminder of this.

Thank you for your attention.

STATEMENT BY STANISLAU SHUSHKEVICH

Belarus in the System of the International Cooperation and Security

Geopolitical interests of Russia are the main obstacles on the path of making Belarus a democratic, law-abiding, neutral nation, an important element for stability and security in Europe. The independence of Belarus was restored de jure in December 1991. Belarus has removed nuclear weapons from

its territory, declared its desire for neutrality, and attempted to follow a path toward democracy, a market economy and open society. Supporters of the Belarusian independence in Belarus are no enemies of Russia. They understand that Russia is more democratic than Belarus is today and that Russia's economy is more liberal. But they also realize that to follow the path of reforms together with an unpredictable Russia is similar to that of following a herd of horses, speeding along without knowing where they might turn next. Russia does not conceal its intentions that it wants to swallow Belarus under the guise of "unification". The Russian Federation Council on Foreign and Defense Policy declared openly that the unification must be used "to oppose the expansion of NATO to the East;" "remove the potential threat of creating the so-called Black-and-Baltic Sea Belt which would isolate Russia"; "improve our military potential by integrating with the Belarusian army"; "remove the Kaliningrad special defense region from military and strategic isolation"; "ensure the integration of the two armies into a single system with a single command and control structure"; and "develop a unified, powerful military industrial complex". Even more cynically, the Council also declared that there "should not be any delay in this matter" and that "one should even pay a certain economic price for such a profitable geopolitical union". And "since the processes of restoring nation"al self-consciousness are being accelerated in Belarus, time is working in favor of the opponents of "integration". So, the unification process should be sped up". It has also been suggested to utilize the main sources of anxiety among the Belarusian people, such as the low economic security, increase in crime, and the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster, because they "divert the attention of the people from the essence of the integration process." In short, it is necessary to expand the Russian empire by suppressing the national self-awareness of the Belarusian people, and utilizing the state of poverty in Belarus. There is no mention of the fact that one of the causes of poverty in Belarus is Russia itself, because it supports the illegitimate regime, a regime that ruins the economy by employing its communist methods of management. Russian politicians are convinced that they represent an empire, or superpower, and that they have the right to dictate the direction that other countries should follow. They "forget" that Russia's "grandeur" today is based solely on nuclear weapons, not on its economic power and that the maintenance and modernization of these weapons at the mutually assured destruction level robs the Russian taxpayer at the expense of the economy. In his New Year's article, Vladimir Putin admitted unconditionally that the standard of living of the average Russian is ten times less than that of the average American, that the Russian GDP is five times less than that of China, and that under the most favorable conditions the average Russian will reach today's standard of living of the average Portuguese in 15-20 years. But, at the same time, on January 10, 2000, Putin approved the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, according to which Russia will oppose both the domination of the international community by Western countries, led by the United States, and the attempt of ignoring Russia's interests which "can undermine the international security and stability". To put this statement into clearer language: Russians are lagging behind economically, but they are great in spirit and, therefore, they can teach others. And those who do not understand this, undermine international security. A government, which relies on such controversial postulates while maintaining the political stability in the country can only be a dictatorship. Unfortunately, there is very little hope that, after securing his power by going through the election process, Mr. Putin will follow the path of developing a peace-time economy for the benefit of the ordinary Russian. The Belarusian experience demonstrates quite the opposite. A fairly sensible people installed a dictator in Belarus, thinking that they will serve as a "brain center" for him and that, because of his personal narrow-mindedness, he will, with a strong hand, carry out their sensible policy. It turned out to be the opposite. The regime established in Belarus is a dictatorship in spite of the fact that the so-called "1996 Constitution" speaks about the "parliament", "legal opposition", "freedom of speech" and even "the principle of the existence of different branches of government". The political opposition and the independent mass media are allowed to exist nominally in Belarus, but they cannot affect the situation because the regime suppresses the democratic opposition by force, intimidation and open political terror. Belarus has become a police state. It has the largest number of members of the police per capita in Europe - 125,000 militiamen in a country of 10 million people. Popular political leaders are disappearing without a trace; members of the parliament with the parliamentary immunity are being arrested; independent lawyers lose their right to defend their clients in courts, and the courts have become nothing but a farce. The Russian leadership, in spite of its own economic difficulties, supports all this. The activity around the absorption of Belarus became only one factor that united the opposing Russian political forces. A set of six treaties which, in effect, were statements of intent and were signed between April 1996 and December 1999, on the unification as well as on the creation of a confederation, and, finally, on the union between Belarus and Russia, demonstrates that Russia supports the illegitimate regime. The treaties also blunt the suffering of the Russian population caused by the war in Chechnya and economic hardships.

The economy of Belarus is in crisis. In 1999, inflation was higher than 220%. The Belarusian ruble, with respect to the Russian ruble, dropped in value by 225 times. The statements issued by the regime about the rise of its GDP and the reduction in the number of people with the required minimum living income are nothing but a bluff. The minimum monthly income per capita was $2.00 in 1998, while the average income was $37.00; in comparison, in neighboring Lithuania, these figures were $105.00 and $256.00 respectively. Opinion polls confirm that there is a drop in confidence for the government. The government bureaucracy also understands that the vain economic attempts made by the regime have no future. The bureaucracy does not feel that it is being protected. At the whim of the dictator any bureaucrat can be handcuffed or lose his job and all means for his survival. The regime promotes its international isolation and without any outside aid, Belarus will not be able to get out of the crisis. The majority of the government bureaucracy is, therefore, interested in the collapse of the dictatorship. This is also true for members in the power authorities. If the opposition would stir up the active part of society while the bureaucrats realize that the regime is unstable and begin to think about their own future, then, with their help, the situation may change drastically. Under these conditions, it would be very important for Belarus to receive help from the international community in its democratic transformation. The OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) has been operating in Minsk since January 1998. OSCE countries have agreed that the elections in Belarus should follow the development of the climate of confidence and the approval of the election code based on the dialogue between the government and the opposition. The international community does not recognize the elections if there are no independent election commissions, which can also be created as a result of negotiations. But the authorities, supported by Russia, have become even more impudent. As a result, on February 22, 2000, 12 opposition parties refused to participate in the so-called elections. They considered the election law, created by the puppet parliament, antidemocratic. However,

the OSCE rules do not permit the organization to effectively influence the regime, which does not want to carry out any democratization. The AMG efforts have resulted in the development of a single, acceptable approach by the opposition to negotiations. These efforts, however, have diverted the attention of the opposition parties from other types of resistance and, in that sense, have thus become counterproductive. The formation of a nation, which has its own language, its own culture, literature, traditions, including the tradition of statehood, cannot be stopped. Belarus will become a law-abiding democratic nation. It will achieve the status of a civilized society. However, the process of democratization and liberalization will be rather long without the help from the countries abroad, in particular, without the support of the enlightening and educational programs by the outside world.

Belarusians are aware of the length of time required for them to get out of this dead end. They understand that the rapid development of the country can only be accomplished with the aid of foreign investments. >From the excellent geographic location to its inexpensive, highly qualified and disciplined labor force, Belarus has plenty of factors favorable for making profitable investments. The political forces inside the country supported by the enlightening and educational aid from the West and, most of all, from the United States, should ensure the transition to democracy and political stability in Belarus. We may then try to convince the United States and Europe to initiate a new Marshall Plan.

Belarusian Opposition Leaders Meet with Talbott

Following is the press statement by James B. Foley, Deputy Spokesman, U.S. Department of State, February 4, 2000.

Belarus: Deputy Secretary Talbott Meets With Belarusian Opposition Leaders

Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott met yesterday with Semyon Sharetsky, Chairman of the 13th Supreme Soviet, as well as with Supreme Soviet deputies former Belarusian President Stanislav Shushkevich and Ludmila Gryaznova. The 13th Supreme Soviet is the democratically elected Parliament of Belarus, which the Lukashenko regime illegally disbanded in 1996 and replaced with a rubber-stamp body. The United States, Western and Central European democracies, and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly continue to recognize the 13th Supreme Soviet as the legal Belarusian Parliament.

They discussed the Russian-Belarusian Union and its possible implications for the future of Belarus. The Deputy Secretary reaffirmed U.S. support for democracy, which the independent Belarusian nation chose in 1991. The Deputy Secretary encouraged these Belarusian officials and all democrats in that country to continue working with the international community on behalf of a democratic and independent Belarus.

U.S. Condemns Brutal Attack on Peaceful March

Following is the text of Press Statement by James B. Foley, Deputy Spokesman, Department of State, March 27, 2000.

The U.S. condemn the brutal and unjustified suppression by the Belarusian authorities of a peaceful March in Minsk on March 25, which was to mark the 82nd anniversary of the creation of the Belarusian National Republic. The authorities deployed police with dogs, riot troops, and armored personnel carriers in central Minsk to arrest 300 to 500 Belarusian citizens, reportedly beating many of them. Among those attacked were Anatoly Lebedko, the First Deputy Chairman of the 13th Supreme Soviet, Polish parliamentarian Mariusz Kaminski, and 35 Belarusian, Russian and Polish journalists. Theauthorities also detained a U.S. citizen accredited to the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in clear violation of his diplomatic status. The Lukashenko regime's suppression of this demonstration makes clear its disinterest in dialogue. We call on the authorities in Minsk to release immediately all those arrested and to show respect for the freedoms of expression and assembly.

OSCE Chairmanship Condemns Use of Force

Following is the text of the OSCE Press Release, March 27, 2000.

OSCE leadership has been worried to learn of the application of force by the Minsk law-enforcers March 25. The use of violence wasn't provoked, it was ungrounded and the authorities went too far with it. Riot police and interior forces attacked a large group of people in Minsk downtown, which resulted in numerous arrests. One day prior to the march the Security Council forbade any opposition actions on March 25, to mark the anniversary of the Belarusian Popular Republic, proclaimed in 1918.

Arrest of peaceful dissenters - pedestrians, opposition leaders, accredited journalists and cameramen is a grave violation of the right to freedom of assembly and dissemination of information, guaranteed by the Belarus Constitution. Detention of the accredited journalist, member of the Advisory Monitoring OSCE Group in Belarus, who - in accordance with his mandate - was to monitor the ongoing events - is an infringement on international conventions and national legislation.

OSCE chairmanship reminds Belarus government of the commitments, it bound itself with, concerning an open dialogue. This dialogue, promoted by the official Belarus and scheduled for March 29, 2000, cannot take place in the atmosphere of violent repression campaign. Thus, OSCE calls upon the Belarus government to free the detainees, arrested March 25, 2000, and respect its international commitments.

Rep. Gejdenson Condemns Anti-Democracy Violence in Belarus

Following is the text of a press release by Rep. Sam Gejdenson's office condemning the government's use of violence to supress a peaceful demonstration in Minsk, Belarus. Washington, D.C.-March 27, 2000.

Congressman Sam Gejdenson, Ranking Member of the House International Relations Committee, today denounced the police beatings and arrests of the pro-democracy demonstrators in Minsk, Belarus: "President Lukashenka's regime has once again displayed its repressive colors. The authorities' harsh reaction to this demonstration was unprovoked. The Belarusian National Front (BNF), which is the civic opposition, has shown peaceful intentions in the previous protest on March 15. The gratuitous use of force, arbitrary arrests, and the detention of journalists, violated the constitutional rights of the Belarusian citizens.

"This latest crackdown makes one doubt President Lukashenka's sincerity about holding a genuine political dialogue with BNF.

"I call on President Lukashenka to immediately release all protesters and journalists detained by the police and make good on his promise to hold free parliamentary elections in 2000 and presidential elections in 2001." The demonstration was organized by the Belarusian opposition to commemorate the creation of the independent Belarusian Democratic Republic in 1918.

Congressman Gejdenson, who visited Belarus in May of 1999, is the author of a Congressional Resolution which calls

for a dialogue between President Lukashenka and the Belarusian opposition and the restoration of a civilian, democratically-elected government in Belarus, based on the rule of law, and an independent judiciary.

Suppression of Peaceful Demonstration in Belarus

Following is the text of a Congressional Record statement made by the Helsinki Commission Chairman, Rep. Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ), on March 29, 2000.

Mr. Speaker, earlier this month, March 9, I chaired a hearing of the Helsinki Commission at which we heard compelling and disturbing testimony about the deterioration of human rights and democracy in Belarus. I was pleased to have as one of our witnesses Anatoly Lebedka, Deputy Chairman of Belarus' legitimate parliament, disbanded by Belarusian strongman Alyaksandr Lukashenka following an illegitimate 1996 referendum.

Unfortunately, Mr. Lebedka was one of some 500 people arrested last weekend, during a peaceful pro-democracy demonstration in Miensk. He was reportedly beaten and spent two days in detention before he was released. He is scheduled to go to trial on April 4. Also detained without explanation were more than 30 Belarusian, Russian and Polish journalists. Film shot by press photographers was reportedly confiscated. Aleh Hrudzilovich, a journalist with the opposition newspaper Nasha Svaboda and Radio Liberty who was initially detained on March 25, was summoned for interrogation on March 27, handcuffed, and then hit several times in the face while being transported by police to a detention center. He was released later that day. Other detainees also reportedly suffered physical abuse by the police. Several demonstrators have been put on trial, and some have already been sentenced to short-term detentions.

Mr. Speaker, during the Helsinki Commission hearing, I asked Mr. Lebedka about the scheduled March demonstrations, where he expressed the fear that there might be deliberate provocations by the police, as had been the case at a Freedom March rally last October. Fortunately, a large peaceful protest held on March 15 was held without any problems. According to many observers, including Mr. Lebedka, the growing number of participants in the officially-approved 30,000 strong March 15 demonstration prompted Lukashenka to take harsh measures against the March 25 demonstrators. Indeed, this comports with Lukashenka's recent warning that protestors who "get out of line" will have "the stuffing" beat out of them.

Mr. Speaker, the suppression of the March 25 demonstration is yet another illustration of the Lukashenka regime's disregard for fundamental human rights, including freedom of assembly and association, and information. It is another among a long list of outrages perpetrated by Lukashenka upon the people of Belarus. It is yet another in a pattern of violations of human rights commitments, which Belarus freely undertook when it joined the OSCE in 1992.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to reiterate my strong concern for the safety of Anatoly Lebedka and all the other pro-democracy activists in Belarus, and I look forward to the day when democracy will flourish someday in Belarus.

Following is the text of a Congressional Record statement made by the Helsinki Commission Co-chairman, Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell (R-CO) 20 on March 30, 2000.

Mr. President, on March 25, Belarusian authorities harshly suppressed a pro-democracy demonstration in the capital of Miensk, arresting and detaining hundreds of peaceful protestors, including nearly 30 domestic and foreign journalists. Riot police, deployed with dogs and armored personnel carriers, used excessive force against some peaceful demonstrators.

Among those detained and beaten was democratic opposition leader Anatoly Lebedka, Deputy Chairman of the 13th Supreme Soviet. Many of my Senate colleagues met Mr. Lebedka last September when I introduced him right here on the Senate floor. Mr. Lebedka was just in Washington earlier this month to testify at a Helsinki Commission hearing about the deteriorating situation in Belarus.

Based on information I obtained from the State Department, I am advised that Anatoly Lebedka was arrested by plainclothes police during the demonstration, kept in detention, and reportedly beaten over the course of two days. He spent most of Monday in a police van outside the courthouse awaiting trial, but was released at 5:00 p.m. His trial has been scheduled for April 4.

Mr. President, the harsh overreaction by the authorities to this peaceful demonstration represents a clear violation of the freedom of association, assembly, and information guaranteed both by the Belarusian constitution and OSCE agreements. In addition, the Belarusian authorities detained a U.S. citizen who is an accredited diplomat and a member of the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus, and who was observing the demonstration in line with his official responsibilities. This action also violates international conventions.

It appears that the green light for the most recent crackdown was given by Belarusian President Lukashenka, who praised the police for their actions. Reports indicate that earlier this month, he cautioned that the riot police will "beat the stuffing out" of any protestor who "gets out of line."

Unfortunately, the suppression by the Belarusian authorities of peaceful protest, along with the sentencing last week of a prominent member of the opposition, does nothing to encourage a constructive dialogue with the democratic opposition that can lead Belarus out of its continuing constitutional impasse and end its self-imposed international isolation.

Mr. President, I call upon the Government of Belarus to thoroughly investigate reports of police brutality during the course of the demonstration and subsequent detentions and take measures to ensure that citizens are guaranteed their rights to engage in peaceful protests, keeping with that country's OSCE commitments.

I was pleased to join Senator Durbin as an original cosponsor to Senate Concurrent Resolution 75 which we introduced last November. That resolution summarized many of the political problems facing the democratic opposition in Belarus expressing strong opposition to the continued egregious violations of human rights, the lack of progress toward the establishment of democracy and the rule of law in Belarus, and calls on Lukashenka to engage in negotiations with the representatives of the opposition and to restore the constitutional rights of the Belarusian people. In light of the recent violent crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators last weekend, I urge my colleagues to support passage of the Durbin/Campbell resolution.

Mr. President, I ask Unanimous Consent that a news report from *The Washington Post* on this latest crackdown be printed in the Record following my remarks.

THOUGHTS and OBSERVATIONS

Belarusian-Russian Integration: A Military-Security Question?

David R. Marples and Yulia A. Shimko

On December 22, 1999, Russia's Upper House ratified the treaty on the long-term merger of Russia and Belarus by a vote of 158-2. The vote followed the formation of a Russian-Belarusian Confederation on December 8, which proposed that the two countries form a body called the Supreme Council, consisting of their presidents, prime ministers, and parliamentary speakers. The two countries in the past have had different ideas of what is signified by the Union. Last month Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov was quoted as stating that the agreement was a declaration rather than a treaty and that the two countries would remain "sovereign and equal members of the international community."

How far has integration developed in practice? In general one can deduce that whereas Belarus is looking to the Confederation to help alleviate economic problems, the Russian side has focused on the military-security union.

The latter question is a complex one that encompasses several facets of military security. The most important step to date in the military cooperation of Russia and Belarus has been the creation of a joint-system of anti-air defence, protecting the western borderlands. This system was founded on the basis of two satellite stations in Belarus that are under the jurisdiction of the Russian army.

In August 1999, Russia and Belarus carried out a joint exercise known as "Armed Forces 99," an air-defence system within the CIS military structure. Russia took on the bulk of the costs required for this exercise, which was based mainly on lessons learned from the NATO war against Yugoslavia in Kosovo and the methods employed there. For its part, Belarusian military enterprises that earlier were harnessed to Soviet military needs were redeployed to provide new types of military weaponry. Two of the largest non-state enterprises today are the Minotor-Servis, which produces the T-2 tank, and the Beltekheksport, the largest factory in the military market. Both these Belarusian enterprises work with counterparts in Russia.

Belarus is very much involved in the resale of Russian weapons, particularly as Russia is not allowed to sell such weapons because of its signatures to international treaties. Recently a transaction was concluded between the Russian company Rosvooruzhenie and Belarus concerning the purchase by Minsk of multi-faceted fighter planes of the MiG-29 design. The purpose of the transaction is the resale of these planes to the government of Algeria. The Belarusian representative in this deal is Beltekheksport. The arms trade at present is the sole means by which Belarus can acquire hard currency to help alleviate its financial situation. But it can only conduct these operations through Russia since its own factories suffer from outdated technology.

Russia has proposed a deeper form of military integration that would see the Belarusian army providing assistance to Russia in its various military campaigns (such as Chechnya). To date, the Belarusian side has balked at this form of integration. President Lukashenka has frequently outlined that Belarusian soldiers will not take part in Russian military conflicts. These statements are less a matter of personal predilection than political expediency: it would lower considerably the president's electoral rating were Belarusian soldiers forced to take part in campaigns outside the republic.

On the other hand, Belarusian military doctrine has changed dramatically since the time of independence. In October 1999 a new edition of official military doctrine was adopted that replaced military neutrality. Instead, the doctrine advocated active defence in the case of external aggression. The principal reason cited is the significant change in the military-strategic balance both in the world and in this particular region of Europe. The events that have most concerned the authorities have been the NATO wars in Iraq and against Yugoslavia in Kosovo on the one hand, and the eastward expansion of NATO to the Belarusian border on the other. These two events have led directly to the formulation of a common military doctrine for Belarus and Russia.

The new military doctrine envisages the re-equipping of the Belarusian army while reducing its size from 83,000 to 60,000 troops. On the Belarusian side, however, there are some serious concerns regarding the change of doctrine. One emanates from the public comments by certain Russian generals that Belarus has become a "buffer" between the Russian Federation and NATO. There is general consensus on the re-designation of the United States as the "number one potential enemy" of the Slavic Brotherhood (Łukašenka's usual term for the Russian-Belarusian alliance). However, Belarus is concerned that the Confederation should enable the strong defence of Belarus against any form of "aggression" from the West.

Gradually, this new defensive structure is being put in place. In the summer of 1999, the Belarusian parliament and upper assembly approved the law "Concerning the ratification of the agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus about joint-use of objects of the mi infrastructure of Russia and Belarus in the interests of providing for the security of the states." The Russian Duma accepted this law on 24 September and the Council of Federation on October 13, 1999.

Evidence suggests that Russia would like to take military integration one stage further. Belarus is reluctant, but may be delaying the inevitable because one of the reasons for the formation of the Supreme Council of the Union of Belarus and Russia was precisely the preservation and maintenance of joint regional security. Often in the past, Łukašenka has used the Russian military bases on Belarusian territory as a form of bargaining for cheap oil and gas from Russia. Gradually, however, the military-security integration is becoming a reality and the streamlined Belarusian army is being given very specific roles within the overall Russian defence structure. The main stumbling block to full integration in the military sphere is the military adventurism of the Russian side beyond the real or perceived borders of the Federation.

David Marples is a professor of history at the University of Alberta and author of Belarus: A Denationalized Nation (1999). Yulia Shimko recently completed a degree program at the Belarusian State Economic University in Minsk

Demonizing the Opposition

By Jan Maksymiuk

The Freedom March-2, staged by the Belarusian opposition in Minsk on 15 March, attracted an estimated 20,000 protesters and, as unanimously agreed by its organizers, was a success. Compared with the Freedom March-1 on 17 October 1999, the protest ended peacefully. There were no clashes with riot police. Police troops, though heavily present in the city on that day, were not present along the march route. The marchers, having adopted a resolution calling for political talks between the regime and the opposition, went home peacefully, while the younger ones stayed for an open air rock concert. Thus, it seems that the opposition scored a considerable propaganda victory in its fight against the government's extremely biased electronic media.

Minsk City Deputy Mayor Viktar Chykin--who is also leader of one of Belarus's two Communist Parties--commented that the march was staged with virtually no breach of the law. According to Chykin, the march organizers fulfilled all promises made to the city authorities regarding the conduct of the event. However, in an overtly Orwellian twist of reasoning, Chykin the next day accused the march organizers of blocking traffic, interfering with public transportation, and preventing people from getting home on time. And he announced that the authorities will no longer grant permission to hold marches in the city. Belarusian Television ensured that its 16 March main newscast included opinions of Minsk residents who were unhappy about the march.

According to Belarusian opposition parties, the Minsk authorities imposed a ban on marches under pressure from the presidential administration and President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who, they argue, was annoyed by the success of the opposition event. Lukashenka told Belarusian Television that the Freedom March-2 brought together a maximum of 7,500 people. A majority of the protesters, he said, were rich people in "mink coats" who are "offended" by his "unpopular" economic decisions that have diminished their wealth.

It is hard to say how many Belarusians believed this statement. On the other hand, the regime has remained consistent in presenting Belarus's political opposition as a group of people devoid of broader popular support. Lukashenka himself has spared no opportunity to portray his political foes as the country's "scum," "dregs," or "drop-outs." "Political analysts" in Belarusian Television's main newscast readily transmit such designations to the entire country.

It seems that this time, however, the regime has sensed it is in danger of losing control over the opposition's media image. The Freedom March-1, which ended in violent clashes between young protesters and riot police, provided a good opportunity for the state-controlled media to portray the opposition as a destructive and demoniac force that wants destabilization and bloodshed. Some commentators also noted that the October march, where protesters burned a draft copy of the Russia-Belarus Union, has offended many in Russia and diminished the readiness of Russian television channels to objectively cover the regime-opposition standoff. The Freedom-2 March has done much to counter the opposition's negative media image, as has the confession by a defector from the Belarusian Interior Ministry saying that last year's clashes were deliberately provoked by the police.

Some Belarusian commentators say the ban on marches in downtown Minsk is aimed at provoking more clashes during the various protest actions that the Belarusian opposition is planning for this spring. In this way, they argue, the authorities will sustain the popular portrayal of Belarusian oppositionists as trouble-makers and social outcasts. To support this argument, the commentators say there would be no problem for the regime to arrest several dozen protest organizers and do away with the opposition problem for a long time. The regime, however, will not do this because it allegedly needs a bugbear to frighten the population and persuade Belarusians that there are people in Belarus more unpredictable and harmful than Lukashenka.

Whatever the true reason for the ban on marches, it is clear that Lukashenka is not going to comply with the international community's appeal to sit at the negotiation table with the opposition and resolve Belarus's political standoff in a peaceful way. It seems that permanent and controlled confrontation in Belarus suits Lukashenka's authoritarian rule as the country and its people sink deeper and deeper into economic poverty and political isolation.

No one should expect that opposition protests will change the political climate in Belarus any time soon. Indeed, as last year's massive protests in Serbia showed, they may not change anything at all. The Belarusian opposition still faces the task of finding how to merge its political demands with some economic proposals that could elicit a broader public response and build a real social force to confront the regime. For the time being, the opposition parties seem to be unable to find any significant sympathy among Belarus' industrial workers or peasants.

At the same time, they have virtually no option but to practice street democracy. "Demonstrations can be avoided when a country guarantees free access to the media, when it holds free and democratic elections. When all this is non-existent, the authorities should allow street demonstrations," opposition leader Mikalay Statkevich commented. It seems that the Lukashenka regime is bent on denying its opponents even that possibility. (RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report No. 12, March 21, 2000)

Jan Maksymiuk is a contributor to RFE/RL Newsline and the compiler of RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report.

BELARUS' FORUM

INTERVIEW
with Vincuk Viačorka, Chairman of the Belarusan Popular Front

By David R. Marples and Yulia A. Shimko

Minsk, Belarus, December 21, 1999

DM: *What would you say are the main differences in policy between you and Mr. Paźniak?*

VV: I think the main difference lies in tactics, not in strategy. There were some opportunities to promote democracy and to defend our independence during the past several years, but unfortunately sometimes the BPF chose monopolistic tactics. It avoided coalitions. For example, in 1996, when the threat of impeachment posed a real threat to Łukašenka, a better-coordinated policy between the political partiesas a whole and the Supreme Soviet could have been more fruitful. This is one illustration.

Another illustration that is closer to the present: several artificial complaints were elaborated by Mr Paźniak during his emigration that have mobilized many of our members all around the country but they were devoid of results. One concerned the citizenship of the Belarusan Democratic Republic (BNR). BNR was a real state that existed in 1918, and this age of our history is a critically important symbol for us. I appreciate very much that we have the government-in-exile. The President of the BNR Council today is Ms. Ivonka Survilla, and what she is doing is very important for our struggle for democracy and independence. She informs the Canadian and western societies and governments



Vincuk Viačorka (Vyachorka)

about events in Belarus. The existence of this symbolic government has long been a kind of banner for us; it was a symbol of hope during all the years of the Communist regime and remains symbolic for us now under pro-Moscow regime pressure. The idea of joining of the democratic-minded citizens of Belarus to the BNR citizenship has a

symbolic and moral importance. Mr. Paźniak tried to convince Belarusan political circles that this campaign can be an effective political action, that it can prevent us from the "integration" with Russia by legitimization of BNR. Unfortunately, the absolute majority of our people simply don't know what the word BNR means.

There are more realistic scenarios to solve our problems. The more proper instruments can be, for example, the creation of a broad coalition between political parties, mass actions directed to resolving several social issues by these actions organized by political parties together with independent and even so-called official trade unions. Pressure on the regime for negotiations can serve as a specific kind of political instrument, too. If there is enough pressure from society, it is possible to force the regime to hold free elections; or to leave political scene. The discussion about political realism and romanticism was one of the main motivations of changes within the Belarusan Popular Front.

DM: *What is your view of the dialogue that the OSCE has initiated between the government and the opposition? Do you think that this can succeed and is a good way to approach the problems?*

VV: There is no dialogue between the government and the opposition. As of today, there are two separate processes: the real dialogue between OSCE and the opposition; and the attemp t to start a dialogue between the OSCE and the regime. From the very beginning of this initiative we expressed our pessimistic view of its possible results. We understand that the word compromise means completely different things to us and to the West on the one hand, and to the regime on the other. We understand what a compromise means: you make a step and wait for an equivalent step from your counterpart. But Łukašenka regards compromise as a weakness of his opponent, after which the opponent should be= completely destroyed. This is a very important point that our western friends sometimes do not comprehend. Thus far, there have been no results. Łukašenka even rejected such a preliminary result as the agreement about access to the media. It was a demonstration for Belarusan public opinion and for the West: Łukašenka made it three days before the Istanbul summit to show in this way his real attitude to the dialog. If Chyhir was released thanks to this protracted game, then it is the only real result to date and I am happy that at least one man is now free, but he is awaiting a trial, and many others are still imprisoned.

DM: *And Vinnikava has just reappeared in the West.*

VV: Right. But we still know nothing about the destiny of Zacharanka and Hančar. So the only positive result of this process is coordination to some degree between the opposition forces in the consultative council, in which several parties were included on the initiative of the OSCE. Very different parties — such as BPF and United Civil Party, on the one hand, and Liberal Democrats Party and the Party of Communists, on the other, are involved. If such different parties can agree on several points, it is a real success. They have agreed that the negotiations should start after implementation of two pre-conditions: release of all political prisoners and regular access of the opposition to state-controlled mass media. But the only way to convince Lukashenka that pre-conditions must be fulfilled and free and fair elections must take place in our country is if a strong wave of protests, pressure from society, takes place. Possible results of this pressure can either be an internal coup d'Etat (within the regime) or the resignation of the regime, or the regime agrees to organize these free and fair elections. But without pressure, nothing happens in this country.

DM: *In terms of pressure, if you look not at political parties, but at society, how closely are you working with free trade unions, official trade unions? Is there some cooperation between the trade union movements and the BPF?*

VV: Yes, there is. The cooperation between the BPF and the independent trade= unions has a long history, from 1990-91, when the first workers' protests took place in Minsk and Salihorsk and the BPF was one of the organizers that helped the workers to formulate their demands. There is sometimes overlap between both structures. But for the past few years the independent trade unions have been in crisis because of pressure by the regime, some legislative limitations, some procedures, and only during the past year, thanks to several new initiatives did we observe reactivation of the independent trade unions in several regions. It occurred first of all in Minsk, and in Salihorsk (the miners), and also in other industrial cities. One more thing: a successful initiative that served as a catalyst for the work of the trade unions was RABOČY ('The Worker') newspaper, which has a circulation of about 100, 000. It was distributed freely in Minsk and other key centers and it tried to find new activists and to involve them through a correspondence network in a trade union structure. And the BPF structures provided considerable assistance in the distribution of this newspaper. Now the publishers plan to sell it on a regular basis.

Concerning the so-called official trade unions: they were as you know a part of Communist power in Russia and this system was very difficult to change. Several political parties were formed on the basis of so-called official trade unions, among them the Labor Party (Alaksandr Buchvostaŭ) and the Women's Party (Valancina Palevikova). Both parties are participants in the opposition Consultative Council. And after several mistakes of the social-economic policy of Lukashenka, the official trade unions had no alternative but to protest. They issued several warnings: we will protest, we will strike locally, we will proclaim a general national strike, and so on. After these warnings the regime usually promised something: that we would receive an additional BR50,000 a month, etc., and it was an instrument to neutralize this wave of protests. But this year the threshold of tolerance was overcome. Mr. Hančaryk, the chairman of the official trade unions was obliged to declare that real mass action would take place, and it took place. The first demonstration of the official trade unions, with the participation of the independent trade unions (even though officially they never declared that they were working together) was the action of 30 September, and from this day the official trade unions became one of the targets of official propaganda. The regime began to declare that they had property, lands, they were too rich and so on and so forth. This is one difference between Łukašenka and Milosevic. Milosevic does not create enemies where it is possible not to do so. So today the official trade unions are on the way to the opposition camp.

DM: *What are your views on the active Union signed between Russia and Belarus? In the West there is some skepticism because there have been so many types of Union announced between Russia and Belarus. One wonders why this one is any different, whether it is any more dangerous than the previous versions.*

VV: We are not so calm about this situation. There is a fairy tale about a shepherd and a wolf. The first time and the second time he shouted "Wolf!" but there was no wolf, so people did not trust him when he cried out the third time. Unfortunately it is a matter of psychological immunity — people feel that nothing is changing, nothing is happening, but it is a corridor for future institutional changes of our statehood. It is a corridor for forcing us to take another direction —the Baltic States, Ukraine, etc. are taking steps to the West and we are excluded from this common process. It would be absolutely natural for us to be in the same camp

and to come together with our neighbors, but now the first signals are clear. The Russian military station near Baranavičy started its trial attempt, the Russian generals discuss when they will put missiles once again in shafts that were not destroyed in Belarus. So first of all it is a creation of common military space. At present Łukašenka promises that our military will not take part in all the imperialist wars, but who knows? If we have a common military space, then a "common space" for the special services (i.e. successors of Soviet KGB), and then several economic steps tie up Belarus to Russia, in a market without a future.

The catastrophe of 17 August 1998 was a real tragedy for the directors of many of our state owned and private enterprises because they hoped that they were under state protection, because all the economic units were protected by the state and to these agreements. But now they have failed, so what does it mean if there is no protection, if there is no diversification between several partners, between several countries?

So-called "integration" is dangerous for our statehood, for our prospects of returning to western civilization, it is dangerous for the stability of the region. Nothing special happens the next day, but something happens every day — small step by small step we are moving into the Russian orbit. It is not so easy to see this, especially from abroad. But we perceive it, and we think that it is dangerous that all the political forces of Russia, probably, with the exception of Yabloko, support this treaty — not only the treaty, but also the "integration". There is no difference in their attitude to Chechnya and to Belarus: both are imperialistic. And Lukashism with its promises to "reunite" Belarus plays into hands of Russian imperialism.

DM: *One of the problems I have studied most is the problem of national consciousness in Belarus. Why do you think it might be possible to raise national-consciousness? My view is that Lukashenka really benefits from the fact that in the countryside, especially in the eastern parts of the country, there is very little recognition of the historical roots of the Belarusan past as opposed to the Russian-Soviet model.*

VV: Do you know the recent results of the population census? The larger percentage of ethnic Belarusans (after the exclusion from our passport of the section in which you have to declare your ethnic origin): 81% of the population declared themselves to be Belarusans and more than 80% among these put Belarusan as their native language. I suppose it is a totally normal situation. To some extent it is a result of the short period of the existence of an independent Belarusan state. The less there is of Homo Sovieticus, the more Homo Europeus emerges. The speculation about Soviet nostalgia, populist or Communist slogans was possible here only because of the weakness of national consciousness. I think we don't need to raise artificially the degree of national consciousness. It exists. Our people don't identify themselves with Russia, they know they are not Russians. I have no figures in front of me, but I know from my everyday contacts that the main motivation for this "reunion" with Russia is not ethnicity, but the nostalgia for Soviet times. This is why Lukashenka was elected, not because of promises to restore Slavic brotherhood, but because he promised that he would return to Soviet times with cheap sausages, etc.

But if the regime destroys the basis of national consciousness, if it attacks the Belarusan language, instruction in Belarusan from kindergarten to universities, if it openly mocks Belarusan language as weak — it was a very interesting statement that he made at the press conference= in Homiel that there are only two languages in the world, Russian and English by which one can express high feelings.

DM: *Ultra chauvinism?*

VV: Yes, it is chauvinism. I am sure that after the return to democracy in our country we will not have problems with national consciousness. There were no protests against the use= of Belarusan language in schools, except in 2-3 places where the majority of students came from the families of Russian officers. In the first half of the 1990s people perceived this as a natural thing. They said: I personally don't speak standard Belarusan very well (they usually spoke in the vernacular) but let my children or grandchildren learn standard Belarusan. The whole system of education started to be gradually changed from kindergartens, it was a quite normal process. The recent attacks on history, the changes in the strategic perception of our historical science show that Lukashenka and the circles around him pay attention to the questions of historical memory and of historical self-identification of Belarusans. The authorities replaced Academician Kaściuk at the Institute of History with Mr. Stačkievič, a specialist in the history of the Communist Party. This is no accident, it is part of the official strategy. P ur poseful changes in the system of writing schoolbooks on history, in the Board of the National Encyclopaedia show that there is no need to construct artificially the consciousness: it is being destroyed by Łukašenka, so it exists.

DM: *In other words, it should be a gradual process. That seems a little different from Mr. Paźniak's conception because he always seemed to me to want to change everything immediately.*

VV: It is not necessary to do it immediately. People do not oppose the process itself, so we should choose natural means for this, not break the harmony.

DM: *How do you think the Western countries could help the Popular Front? What would be an effective form of assistance? To provide more publicity, for example?*

VV: I prefer to think not about help to the BPF, but to Belarus. What does it mean? I understand the West has to choose between two possible tactics: to contact the regime waiting when it will be destroyed from within or to isolate the regime supporting the democratic alternative. If to insist on negotiations at any price, it means the first variant. The regime is not isolated and, as a result, feels itself confidently. For example, the Czech Republic gives credit to Łukašenka to buy grain. I suppose the grain will be used to produce spirit, to sell it in Russia and to enlarge the "black market". No isolation means enough resources for the regime to suppress opposition. On the other hand, support for the democratic alternative strengthens the democratic process in the country and the negotiations really can have real results. At the moment the planned negotiations simply serve as a decoration for the direct way to legitimize the regime after 20 July.

Let me make one more digression about the negotiations. According to the "union agreement", the elections to the "union parliament" are planned. Usually, Russian elections a priori are regarded as democratic. So, if Łukašenka combines national parliamentary or even presidential elections with "union elections", the results of all can be internationally recognized, and Łukašenka is legitimized in the Western eyes without negotiations! This scenario is only one illustration, how closely questions of independence and democracy are connected in Belarus.

One more remark about the Western assistance. We here have no illusions about Russia. There is a real danger that the new Kremlin power camp is built around a bloody KGBist, to be honest. His main victory is ethnocide in the Caucasus. It is very dangerous that all the colors of the Russian political scene now are united under the banner of genocide and imperialism. It shows that this country is very far from returning to the family of civilized nations. At the same time, Russia is the main factor

that ensures the stability of the Łukašenka regime because the regime is strategically important for it. The "integration" and "Russia-Belarus union" are the pseudonyms for restoration of empire. So, Russia should receive a strong and unambiguous message from the Western side: no assistance is delivered to Russia if support for puppet Minsk regime and imperialistic scenario of "integration" is continued.

Assistance for the BPF? Unfortunately, we were the victim of a propaganda campaign by the Communist regime, the Kiebič government, and the Łukašenka regime. We are not nationalists in the sense of Le Pen. Our name — the Belarusan Narodny Front — should be properly transla ted as the Belarusan Popular Front, and we identify ourselves within the spectrum of Western political parties. We see ourselves more or less like the European People's Party, as the faction in the European Parliament is called, or the American Republicans, though the American political scene is not the same as ours. It is very difficult now to find groups or formulate interest in social democracy or conservatives because the real political scene will only be formed after the return here to democracy and an unchangeable independence. But we are not ethnic nationalists. We are for independent statehood of Belarus, we have no illusions about Russia, but we are not anti-Russian in the ethnic sense. There are a lot of ethnic Russians in our leadership. For example, Mr. Barščeŭski, who for two years carried out the duties of the exiled leader Paźniak, is an ethnic Russian. So the ethnic question is absolutely irrelevant.

It is important for us to change our image in the eyes of the Western politologists and decision-makers, because we really are the main political force here. We are not so large, bu= t we have the best structure, we have units in every rayon with the exception of the Chernobyl regions. We have a lot of responsibility and many activists who are ready to work for democracy and Western values. Thus we don't want to be excluded from contacts, we want to be perceived in an appropriate way.

DM: *It is probably difficult for Popular Fronts that were prominent ten years ago. None of them are really in a position of power. The Rukh in Ukraine has really dwindled as a political force. But your situation is very different.*

VV: Rukh was involved in power. Ukrainian people hoped that democracy would bring them prosperity. They failed. It was not such a model of democracy as in Estonia and Poland. It was an oligarchy model. But my opinion is that Rukh is now obliged to share the responsibility. Unfortunately, even people who on the one side were for independence, and on the other for future prosperity tried to find forces and politicians other than Rukh. They believe that when Rukh was in power, then nothing happened. It was strange to me that nationalists such as Slava Stetsko supported the ex-KGBist Marchuk.

DM: *It was also odd that Western Ukrainians supported Kuchma.*

VV: Yes, but what about us? From the very beginning typologically we were similar to those types of movements in the three Baltic States and in Ukraine. The movement was smaller in Belarus and not so influential because of the comparative weakness of self-identity here, but it was a real force and in 1991 we did not exploit this enough. We could have done everything, as I understand now, but there was insufficient experience, there was not the readiness to go to the nomenklatura and dictate what must be done. The only thing we achieved was Šuškievič. Šuškievič was placed in his position (Speaker of the Supreme Soviet) thanks to the BPF, thanks to the people in Independence Square demanding change. But the BPF cannot be accused of sharing power. There was a very good chance in 1992 when we collected half a million signatures in support of new elections, but we did not collect people in Independence Square to demand this referendum. It is history.

Then there were several years of self-sufficiency of our organization and only now are we changing our image to be more open, to be ready to create coalitions. It is senseless to be afraid of coalitions in our situation. We are a strong organization, so for us and others there is a chance to multiply our resources not merely add to them. And now we avoid the unrealistic scenarios. We want realistic proposals. For example, now we hope that the spring of 2000 should be rather tempestuous because we will try to combine social protest with purely political protest against pro-Moscow dictatorship. And sadly we have ignored the social component of protest, it was our mistake — not strategic, but important.

DM: *I want to ask you about your goals for the year 2000. If there are parliamentary elections, for example — I don't know to which parliament there would be elections — would the BPF take part in them?*

VV: This is the point. Elections to which body? If the present law remains or the election code elaborated by the Upper House remains, we will not take part in the elections. The BPF was the first to ignore the local elections last spring. Several other democratic parties declared that they would participate because it provided an opportunity to visit apartments, to propagandize and so on, but after several decrees that completely restricted the possibility to participate, then they agreed with us. And the international community did not recognize the results of these local elections, so the move was a success. Even those elected — several Communists and LDP members — can do nothing within these bodies. They have no power. And the Assembly has no power either.

And if there is no presidential pressure, but normal power, then it is a matter for debate. What should be the basis: the Constitution of 1994 or the hybrid constitution? Or should there be a new constitutional council that will step by step elaborate the principles of new elections? There can be no elections without common agreement between the government and the opposition, and this agreement can be reached only after preconditions have been fulfilled: the release of all the political prisoners; an end to all the politically motivated criminal cases; and real access to the media. Normal conditions. I am rather skeptical, but the hot spring will put pressure on the regime to agree to the negotiations. It is our prognosis. And so we will participate in the coalition, together with the United Civil Party and the Social Democrats.

DM: *OK. The last question I have is about the expansion of NATO and the EU to the border of Belarus. This surely puts a lot of pressure on Belarus to turn in one direction or the other: Either toward Russia or toward Europe or NATO. My impression at the moment is that Belarusans are in favor of the EU but opposed to NATO. It is difficult to discern, but do you think it is a case of one or the other alternative or will it take some time before Belarus decides which way to go?*

VV: From a historical perspective, we have no choice but to join European structures. We have been neighbors of Russia for a thousand years and we know that it is very dangerous to be a neighbor of such a state. To this moment the BPF has not declared that its aim is to completely join up with the Western structures. But on the other hand, the typical attribute of our marches here is the slogan: Łukašenka to prison! Belarus to NATO! What about the younger generation of Belarusans? It is natural for them to identify themselves with all the Western institutions, including NATO. But we here live in monopolized information space. We have only one Belarusan TV channel that I hope you have had the experience to watch.

DM: *Oh yes.*

VV: And we have from 2 to 6 Russian channels. And the Yugoslavian war was shown here only in a propagandized form from one channel to another. There is no pluralism of th media here and this had an impact on the attitudes toward NATO. Thus it will take some time to change public opinion.

What about NATO? The neutrality of our country was an important point of the first program of the BPF. It was the only way to stress that we were separate from the Warsaw Treaty, from the Tashkent treaty, and all the other treaties initiated by Moscow. This position of our program was only partially fulfilled in the Constitution of 1994. The striving for neutrality was written in the Constitution — a very interesting formula that allowed pro-Russian forces here to make military agreements with Russia. I think that the steps should be in several stages: first real neutrality from Russia; second, dissolving the treaties, and then gradually to join Western structures. But I stress that this is all in perspective, it is not our current slogan.

PARTIES STAKE OUT POSITIONS ON POLITICAL DIALOGUE

The 2 March *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* published a "verbatim report" of a meeting of Belarusian opposition and pro-government politicians in the newspaper's editorial office to discuss the problem of political dialogue in Belarus. The discussion was moderated by Pavel Yakubovich, chief editor of *Sovetskaya Belorussiya. Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, with its circulation of 460,000 is Belarus's largest daily and President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's main mouthpiece among the press. Attempts to organize negotiations between the authorities and the opposition on the 2000 parliamentary elections were made last year by the OSCE Consultative and Monitoring Group in Minsk. However, those attempts failed in December after Lukashenka rejected an agreement concluded by his negotiator Mikhail Sazonau and opposition parties on the latter's access to state-controlled media. Lukashenka took even more uncompromising stance in February by signing the electoral code adopted the previous month by the two houses of his subservient legislature: the Chamber of Representatives and the Council of the Republic. The authorities assert that the code incorporates all major proposals by the OSCE and allows free and democratic elections to be held in Belarus.

The Belarusian opposition, on the other hand, argues that the document does not provide for democratic and transparent election procedures. More significant, the code was adopted without consultations with the opposition, which Lukashenka had promised when he signed the final document of the OSCE summit in Istanbul on 19 November. Europe's first reactions to Belarus's electoral code were extremely negative. Wolfgang Berendt, a special rapporteur from the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, told RFE/RL's Belarusian Service on 17 February that Belarus will neither be accepted as a member of the council, nor will it receive EU economic support if it holds parliamentary elections based on that code. Elisabeth Schroedter, head of the European Parliament's group for Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine, said Lukashenka's signing of the electoral code signals an end to attempts by European organizations "to bring Belarus back to democracy in a peaceful way." Schroedter noted that elections held in accordance with that code might result in the "complete isolation" of Belarus.

Most likely, Lukashenka had taken into account those negative assessments when he announced in late February that he agrees to a "broad public and political dialogue" in which various political and public organizations would participate. However, the Belarusian opposition--coordinated by the Consultative Council of Opposition Parties--thinks that Lukashenka's move is aimed at offering an imitation of a political dialogue in order to legalize this year's parliamentary elections in the eyes of the West without making any changes to electoral procedures or giving the opposition a fair chance in the elections. The opposition insists on "negotiations" that might result in concrete political decisions on the powers of a future parliament and electoral legislation.

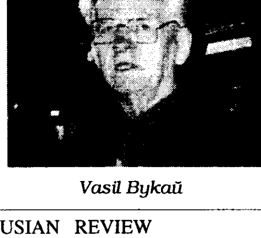
The discussion in *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* was published on the day of the arrival in Minsk of Europe's "parliamentary troika"--composed of representatives of the European Parliament, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the OSCE. The declared goal of the troika is to "encourage all sides involved in political discussions to reach agreement on new electoral legislation, on the role and functions of the future parliament which will emerge from [this fall's] elections, and on the position of the media."

At the meeting in the editorial offices of *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, the opposition was represented by Stanislau Bahdankevich (United Civic Party), Syarhey Kalyakin (Belarusian Party of Communists), Mikalay Statkevich (Belarusian Social Democratic Party--Popular Hramada), Vintsuk Vyachorka (Belarusian Popular Front), and Valyantsina Palevikova (Belarusian Women's Party "Hope"). The pro-Lukashenka side was represented by Viktar Chykin (Communist Party of Belarus), Anatol Barankevich (Belarusian Patriotic Party), Leanid Shkolnikau (Movement for Social Progress and Justice), Syarhey Posakhau (Belarus's permanent representative in the CIS), and Anatol Krasutski (Chamber of Representatives). (RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report No. 9, March 7, 2000)

BELARUSIAN CULTURE

No Home for Bykau in Belarus

Vasil Bykau is one of the best-known authors in Belarus. Born in 1924, he started writing in 1960, publishing classics such as "The Alps Ballad," "The Dead Do Not Feel Pain" and "Sotnikov." A highly respected writer during the Soviet times, though often criticized, he was awarded the Soviet Union's top literary prizes and made a "Hero of Socialist Labor." In 1980, he was named the People's Writer of Belorussia. Last year, Bykau received Russia's top independent literary prize "Triumf". (Charter 97, February 2, 2000)



Vasil Bykaŭ

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Vasil Bykau left Belarus for Germany on February 3. The independent *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta* noted that Bykau's departure followed the "hounding organized by ideologists of today's Belarusian regime." Among the Belarusian intelligentsia, Bykau is called "the conscience of the nation." He is a staunch advocate of Belarus's national revival and independence and supports the opposition Belarusian Popular Front.

From June 1998 to January 2000, Bykau lived in Helsinki, Finland, where he was offered housing and financial assistance by the Finnish PEN-Center. Under the re-Sovietization and re-Russification policies pursued by Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Bykau has become something of a dissident in the eyes of the regime. The state-run publishing house *Mastatskaya Litaratura* (Belles Lettres) in Minsk has not dared to publish his collection of stories and novellas that were written in the 1990s. The book, titled *The Wall*, was eventually published in 1997 by the independent publishing house *Nasha Niva*, financed by money raised among Bykau's readers. (Last month *The Wall* appeared in Polish translation in Bialystok, Poland, published with financial support from, among others, Belarusian-minority organizations in Poland.)

Bykau returned from Finland in early January to receive the Russian literary prize *Triumf* in Moscow. On 15 January, he was sharply attacked on Belarusian Television by Vladimir Sevruk, a former ideologist of the Belarusian branch of the CPSU. Following that attack, Russian writer Valentin Oskotskii published in *Izvestiya* an appeal to the Russian public to offer Bykau refuge in Russia because of the hostility of the Belarusian regime toward him. The Belarusian Union of Writers did not respond until the end of January to the Belarusian Television attack, calling it "immoral and inadmissible." Bykau told the January 26 *Izvestiya* that "today in Belarus we have favorable conditions for the return of the ideology that prevailed in the Soviet era."

According to *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, Bykau also received offers from PEN Centers in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Latvia to reside temporarily in thosecountries, but he eventually chose Germany, where he is expected to remain with his wife for "several months." (RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report No. 7, February 15, 2000)

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Death of Mikoła Jermałovič



On March 4, 2000 Mikoła Jermałovič, Belarus' most prominent historian, met tragic death at the age of 78 under the wheels of a taxi in front of his house in Miensk.

He was a brilliant scholar and Belarusian patriot, the first historian in Soviet Belarus to disprove the myth about the non-existence of Belarusian statehood before the 20th century.

His research focused on the ancient period of Belarus' history (9th through 14 centuries).

Publication of his works was prohibited during the Soviet era. In 1989 he published his first book "On Traces of a Myth", and then, in 1994 "Ancient Belarus. Vilnia period". In his works he disproved Soviet historians' theories about the Baltic (Lithuanian) conquest of Belarusian lands in Middle Ages.

BELARUSIANS ABROAD

Šarecki (Sharetski) Visits Canada and U.S. — Meets with High-Level Government Officials

By Alice A. Kipel

During the end of January through the beginning of February 2000, Mr. Siamion Šarecki, Speaker of the 13th Belarusian Parliament, visited Canada and the United States, and met with high-level government officials in both countries. The 13th Belarusian Parliament (which is considered by most Western governments to be the last legally elected parliament in Belarus) was disbanded in 1996 by Belarus President Alyaksandr Łukašenka. Mr. Šarecki currently lives in Lithuania under the protection of the Lithuanian parliament.

Mr. Šarecki's visit to Canada was at the invitation of the University of Western Ontario. On January 24, 2000, Mr. Šarecki delivered a speech at the university, engendering many questions. He also met with Dr. Davenport, president of the university, as well as with faculty and students. The following day, Mr. Šarecki spoke at Waterloo University. At both universities, he addressed the current political situation in Belarus.

On January 26, Mr. Šarecki arrived in Ottawa, where he met with Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lloyd Axworthy. Also in attendance at the meeting was the President of the Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic in Exile, Mrs. Ivonka Survilla. Mr. Axworthy expressed great interest in the current situation in Belarus. While of course touching upon the issue of human rights, Mr. Axworthy also focused on other questions pertaining to Belarus. He noted that, thus far, Canada has been providing its input through international organizations and multilateral mechanisms, such as the OSCE. Now, however, Mr. Axworthy indicated that he would be expressing his interest bilaterally.

Mr. Šarecki's official activities in the United States began on the morning of February 2, 2000, during a briefing at the offices of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Washington, D.C., where he spoke on the topic of "Restoring Constitutional Democracy in Belarus." Also participating during the briefing and other meetings that day were two of Mr. Šarecki's parliamentary colleagues, Ms. Ludmiła Hraznova and Mr. Stanisłaŭ Šuškievič. The three Belarusian representatives met with U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott. Mr. Talbott reaffirmed U.S. support for democracy in Belarus.

The Belarusian legislators also met with Harold Koh, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, during which time they took the opportunity to inform Mr. Koh about the abuse of power and human rights violations by state authorities in Belarus. Also included on the agenda in Washington was a discussion with Steny Hoyer, a member of the Congressional Helsinki Commission and the vice-president of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. Mr. Šarecki and his colleagues briefed Mr. Hoyer with respect to the impasse between the democratic opposition and the government in Belarus, as well as the threat to Belarus' independence which is posed by Russian chauvinism. A visit was also paid to Congressman Sam Gejdenson, a supporter of the struggle for democracy in Belarus.

February 8, 2000 marked the last day of meetings in Washington, D.C. for Mr. Šarecki. The morning was devoted to less formal meetings, with Mr. Rodger Potocki of the National Endowment for Democracy, and with the former U.S. Ambassador to Belarus, David Swartz. Later in the day, Mr. Šarecki participated in an in-depth meeting with Mark Medish, Senior Advisor for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia at the National Security Council. Mr. Šarecki spoke about the reign of terror being exercised by the Łukašenka regime, including the suppression of peaceful protests and unsubstantiated arrests of

members of the political opposition. He asked for support from the United States and international organizations to help restore democracy in Belarus.

Mr. Šarecki also warned that vigilance was necessary to ensure that financial support given to Russia is not diverted to the Łukašenka regime. Mr. Medish responded by voicing concern over the current situation in Belarus. He also indicated an understanding of the difficulty presented by Belarus' geographic location.

Mr. Šarecki concluded his trip to Washington on Capitol Hill, where he visited with the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Dennis Hastert, and with Congressman Christopher Smith, Chairman of the Congressional Helsinki Commission. Mr.Šarecki expressed thanks for the support that legislators in the United States have extended to members of the 13th Belarusian Parliament. He stressed that the problems being faced in Belarus today need to be addressed independently of any consideration of the issues that may affect Russia or relations between Russia and the United States. Speaker Hastert indicated his awareness that stabilization in Belarus is important not just with respect to the fate of Belarus itself, but also with respect to stability in the entire area surrounding Belarus. In his capacity as Chairman of the Congressional Helsinki Commission, Congressman Smith encouraged Mr. Šarecki to return to the United States to testify before Congress. In addition, he questioned Mr. Šarecki as to what more can be done to assist Mr. Šarecki and other members of the opposition in their struggle for lawfulness and democracy.

State Department Official Visits Belarusan-American Communities

The Coalition in Defense of Democracy and Human Rights in Belarus hosted U.S. State Department Belarus Desk Officer John Armstrong on a visit to the Belarusan communities in New Jersey and New York on February 26 and 27. Mr. Armstrong visited the Belarusan Autocephalic Orthodox Church (BAOC) of St. Mary of Zyrovicy in Highland Park, NJ, St. Euphrosynia Belarusan Greek-Orthodox Church in South River, NJ and attended the Belarusan Festival at the Cathedral of St. Cyril of Turau (BAOC) in Brooklyn, NY. He had extensive discussions with the leaders of the Coalition, leader of the Belarusan independent movement, Mr. Zianon Paźniak, and representatives of the Belarusan Autocephalic Orthodox Church.

In discussions with the members of the Coalition, Mr. Armstrong conveyed the U.S. Government's strong support for those struggling to restore democracy to Belarus. He noted that the Łukašenka's regime repression of human rights had increased significantly over the past year. In regard to union with Russia and the threat it presents for Belarus' independence, Mr. Armstrong stated that "the U.S. Government is not opposed to integration among states, provided that such integration is voluntary, mutually beneficial and does not erect new barriers. For integration to be voluntary, there must be democratic process. No democratic process exists in Belarus. Therefore, the union with Russia can not be considered voluntary or representative of the will of the Belarusan people." Mr. Armstrong also noted the undemocratic nature of the election law signed by Mr. Łukašenka on February 15 and pointed out that this law did not result from negotiations with the democratic opposition. He added that this was contrary to what Mr. Łukašenka promised when he signed the Istanbul Declaration last November.

Leaving New Jersey, Mr. Armstrong assured Coalition leaders that the U.S. Government's support for an independent and democratic Belarus will continue. He thanked the Coalition for organizing his visit and declared his openness for future discussions with representatives of the Belarusan-American Community.

(Press Release by Coalition in Defense of Democracy and Human Rights in Belarus, Highland Park, New Jersey, USA, February 28, 2000)

March 2000 in Prague

During the month of March Prague witnessed a series of events associated with protest marches in Belarus, the commemoration of March 25, and a visit by President Ivonka Survilla, the president of BNR Rada, and the well-known renowned Belarusian writer, Mr. Vasil Bykaŭ.



President Ivonka Survilla

Chronicle of these events

• March 16, day after the Constitution Day and Freedom March 2 in Belarus:

Public hearing before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Czech Senate. The hearing which focused on current political situation in Belarus, was chaired by Sen. Michael Žantovský, the former Czech ambassador to the U.S. The discussion panel included senators Jan Ruml and Petr Pithart, deputy Jiří Payne, and former Belarusian parliament deputy Siarhiej Navumčyk .

• March 24: - special press conference, given by President Survilla nd Mr. Bykaŭ.

- Our guests met with Mr. L. Zaorálek, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies.

• March 25: Festive observance of the Belarusian Independence Day in the Mirror Chapel of Klementinum in Prague. The meeting was attended by cca. 200 persons, about half of whom were recent political refugees from Belarus. Young Belarusians, studying at various Central European universities, were also well represented.

Dr. M. Ivanoŭ of the Skaryna Society and Mr. S. Navumčyk delivered lectures on history of the BNR Rada and the current situation in Belarus. Then the meeting was addressed by guests: President Survilla, Mr. Vasil Bykaŭ, Mr. Zianon Paźniak — chairman of the Christian Conservative Party of BNF, Mr. Aleś Stankievič — secretary of the Belarusian Social-Democratic Party (Narodnaja Hramada), and Messrs. Jury Sokał and Viktar Syryca representing the non-governmental School of Economics and Law in Baranavičy (Belarus).

Mr. Petr Uhl, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Czech Republic, was also present at the meeting.

In the afternoon the public visited the Olšany Cemetery in Prague to honor the memory and graves of BNR presidents Piotra Krečeŭski and Vasil Zacharka, and of the Belarusian opera singer Michaś Zabejda-Sumicki.

• March 25 and 26: President Survilla nd Mr. Bykaŭ gave interviews on Czech TV.

• March 27: Mr. Bykaŭ visited the Czech PEN-Club.

• March 28: President Survilla nad Mr. Bykaŭ took part in the ceremony of planting the "Tree of Democracy for Belarus", together with 40-odd members of Belarusian youth organizations who were invited to Czech Republic by Czech Young Conservatives.

The same day our guests met with students of the Charles University.

• Finally, on March 29, President Survilla nad Mr. Bykau paid an official visit to the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs and to the Office of President Václav Havel at the Prague castle.

The Prague Belarusian community wishes to extend its gratitude to our Czech friends who were instrumental in arranging meetings with influential figures from the Czech political life and Czech society in general.

Our friends include: Mr. Adam Havlín from the TV foundation "People in Need" and Messrs. Luboš Veselý and Jan Marian from the Association for International Affairs.

Brief biographies of guests in Prague

• **President Ivonka Survilla,** president of Rada (Council) of Belarusian Democratic Republic (BNR).

Mrs. Survilla was born in Belarus in 1936. She grew up in France and studied art history at L'Ecole Nationale Superieure des Beaux-arts in Paris. Received a degree from the modern languages department of the Sorbonne university.

After marrying Janka Survilla in 1959, she moved to Madrid where she worked as a newspaper reporter and lecturer at the French Institute. Their two daughters Hanna and Paŭlinka were born in Madrid. In 1969 they moved to Ottawa, Canada where Mrs. Survilla worked in managerial functions at the Federal Translation Institute until her retirement in 1996.

Mr. and Mrs. Survilla were active members of the Belarusian-Canadian community. In 1974 Mrs. Survilla was elected president of the Belarusian Institute of Arts and Sciences of Canada. In 1984 she was elected to leadership of the Canadian Ethnocultural Association, which represents 34 ethnic organizations. Before the Chernobyl disaster she was an active member of the artists' community in the National Capital Region and participated in about 30 exhibitions in Canada and United States.

After the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 Mrs. Survilla initiated a campaign to provide humanitarian aid to disaster victims in Belarus. In 1989, together with her husband Janka Survilla, Paul Paškievič and Dr. Zina Gimpelevich, she founded the Canadian Relief Fund for Chernobyl Victims in Belarus (CRFCVB), a foundation providing medical assistance for Belarusian hospitals and securing summer visits for young victims of Chernobyl. In 1997 the organization brought to Canada more than 600 Belarusian children

The Foundation also arranges visits of Belarusian medics, providing hands-on working experience in Canadian hospitals.



President Survilla plants the TREE OF DEMOCRACY for BELARUS

After her election to the post of president of BNR Rada in 1998, she resigned her leadership of the CRFCVB. After the success of this foundation she became convinced that she would be more effective in helping to re-establish democracy in Belarus

• For a brief biography of **Mr. Vasil Bykaŭ,** refer to the article *No home for Bykaŭ in Belarus* in our section BELARUSIAN CULTURE (p. 16)

Belarus: 'The Forgotten Heart of Europe'

The European Research Institute of the University of Bath, England, and the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence hosted a two-day special seminar, "Belarus: The Forgotten Heart of Europe?" February 11-12, 2000. Scholars, mostly young, came from England, Belarus, France, the Czech Republic, Canada, and the United States. Fourteen papers were presented on political, economic, social and foreign relations topics. The audience of about forty specialists participated in a lively discussion and debate on problems of contemporary Belarus. Below is the paper delivered at the seminar by Dr. Jan Zaprudnik.

THE BELARUSAN (TWENTIETH) CENTURY: A Comparative Look at the First and the Last Decades

By Jan Zaprudnik

The direction in which recent developments are steering Belarus is eliciting differing opinions on the Belarusan nationhood and diverging predictions for the future. Some observers suggest that the Belarusan people are being denationalized and are bound to disappear from the stage of history. Others see a growth of national assertiveness and continuous, albeit slow, development as a nation. Events of the last decade supply evidence for both schools, and debates on Belarusan identity are certain to continue. It would be instructive, therefore, to take a comparative look at the two decades of the twentieth century, the first and the last, in an attempt to locate direction of the developmental trends. A view of the whole century would be in tune with the commendation that we in our workshops take a "holistic approach."

The common wisdom says that *Rečy paznajucca ŭ paraŭnańni* (Things are judged by comparison). And indeed, much of what has been said about Belarus in order to place it on the scale of historical advancement was influenced by comparison with the surrounding states, particularly Ukraine and the Baltic neighbors. The conclusions derived from such comparisons usually present the Belarusan people as an anomaly, because they differ so obviously in some important aspects from the surrounding nations. Of course, no one can deny the validity of the comparative method. Therefore, let us compare Belarus of the 1900s to Belarus of the 1990s. To weigh the two decades let me suggest the following indicators (realizing, of course, that they cannot be exhaustive):

1) political status of the country; 2) social structure of society; 3) nationally conscious intelligentsia; 4) level of education in society, the state of the national language, and the Belarusan-language press; 5) organizations advancing the national cause; 6) role of the diaspora; 7) attitude of the international community toward the Belarusan national cause.

The 1900s

1. What and where was Belarus at the start of the century? In a sense, it barely existed. The official name of the country was *Severo-Zapadnyy Kray* (the North-Western Region). The content of the term "Belarus" was essentially ethnographic. The "father" of modern Belarusan literature, Francišak Bahuševič, in his 1891 books of poems, *Dudka bielaruskaja* (Belarusan fife) foresaw the question "Where is Belarus today?" and answered: "Where our language lives: it stretches from Vilnia to Mazyr, from Viciebsk almost to Charnihau, where there are Hrodna, Miensk, Mahileu, Vilnia and many towns and villages"[1] However, in the same year, 1891, the scholarly *Entsiklopedicheski Slovar'* of Brockhaus-Yefron explained quite differently where Belarus was. "Presently," it wrote, "Belorussiya includes mainly Minsk, Mogilev, Vitebsk, and the western part of the Smolensk

gubernias."[2] Please note that neither the Vilnia, nor the Hrodna gubernias, where Belarusans were in the plurality, were mentioned by the encyclopedia. Indeed, these two western gubernias were still called)*litovskiye* ("Lithuanian"), a name that echoed the historical epoch of the Grand Duchy of Litva, in which Belarus was a major component territorially, culturally and politically. So, at the beginning of the century we don't even have a clear-cut meaning of the name "Belarus" whose ethnographic and geographic meaning did not coincide.

2. In terms of social groups, Belarus's population at the beginning of the century was 90 percent rural and only 12 percent urban. The urban population consisted of Jews (the largest category) as well as Poles, Russians, and Tatars. Only 2.6 percent of Belarusans dwelled in cities. The concept of Belarusan ethnicity was tightly attached to that of the peasantry. In the official rosters of the State Duma, for example, there was a hyphenated nationality-category, "peasant-Belarusan" or "Belarusan-peasant" *(krestyanin-belorus or belorus-krestyanin)*. The country's economy was basically agricultural with vast tracts of land in the hands of Polonized landlords.

3. It is hard to speak of a Belarusan national elite at the beginning of the century. The 1890s, in Anthony Adamovich's words, was "a period of individuals." At the start of the century, those scattered pioneers of national rebirth faced the darkness of collective amnesia and wide-spread illiteracy. Most of the activists in the Belarusan Renewal (Adradžeńnie) came from the middle and lower social strata. Many were self-educated, impoverished and inexperienced in organizational work. The urban landscape, where political causes normally find their adepts, was intrinsically unfruitful for the Belarusan national movement because of the cultural cleavage and social stigma attached to the peasantry.

4. Overall literacy in the 1900s was about 32 percent, but with a difference between city and village dwellers. While 57 percent of urbanites were literate, only 24 percent were in the villages.[3] The Belarusan language, after two centuries of banishment and disuse in print, was spoken almost exclusively by the peasants and townsfolk. With the exception of folklore and linguistic studies and some clandestine booklets (very few), there were no publications in the Belarusan language until 1905, when the imperial government lifted its prohibition. Schooling in Belarusan, on the other hand, had to wait another ten years for German permission under their occupation. Modern Belarusan literature began flourishing, first in poetry and somewhat later and slower in prose writing, only after the weekly newspaper *Naša Niva* was launched in Vilnia in 1906. Reading *Naša Niva* today demonstrates two things: firstly, the tremendous lexical obstacles the editors had to overcome (in many cases by simply using calques from Russian) and secondly, the distance the Belarusan language has covered since those days in developing its own political and sociological terminology.

5. In terms of national institutes, the Belarusan political universe of the first decade was covered in darkness. Would-be renewers (*adradžency*) were still in high schools or universities. The mythology of the past national greatness, adumbrated by Francišak Bahuševič in 1891 in a brief "Foreword" to his clandestinely published book of poetry, had to wait for its bard, Janka Kupała (born in 1882), who came to full voice only after 1910. The idea of autonomy for Belarus found its institutionalized expression in 1903 in the program of the Belarusan Socialist *Hramada* (union). In other words, ideologically the Belarusan movement was still in embryo stage in the 1900s. One of the r easons why it could not have developed earlier was the lack of historical retrospective. As late as 1910, Vacłaŭ Łastoŭski, a self-educated historian, wrote his "Short History of Belarus," presenting the bygone epochs in which the Belarusan people could take pride.

6. An organized Belarusan diaspora was practically non-existent during the 1900s, although thousands were leaving the country. Many peasants escaping land hunger moved to Siberia. Even more, including Jews, left for America. However, for reasons of economic hardship, lack of education, low national consciousness and other impediments, the diaspora was poorly organized and the ties of those who left with the native land were minimal.

7. The world considered Belarus a province of the Russian empire, pure and simple. Some distinct cultural characteristics of the Belarusan people, known to a small circle of scholars, were considered to be traits of a "branch" of Russians, as the popular stereotype had it: Great Russians, Little Russians, and White Russians. There could not have been any interest in the Belarusan cause by any foreign power since the cause was in the infancy stage.

In summary, the 1900s for the Belarusan movement was a decade of first steps: the first political party, the first legal newspaper, the first publishing house, the first compilation of a history from the national perspective. The progress of reawakening was slow and painful, considering the lengthy period of hibernation under the dampening effect of Russianness and Polishness during the preceding two centuries.

Before taking a look at the last decade of the twentieth century, it should be noted that tremendous changes took place in the interim period. The most fundamental of them were territorial enlargement, industrialization, urbanization, and universal education. These all left their imprint on the Belarusan national cause.

The 1990s

1. The comparison of the 1990s to the 1900s brings to mind the most obvious difference — the political status of the country. Belarus today is an internationally recognized nation. The republic, a member of the UN since 1945 and formally independent since 1991, maintains diplomatic missions in nearly fifty of the world's capitals. In December 1994, the United States and United Kingdom along with Russia declared in a signed memorandum their intent "to respect the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Belarus ."[4] Although on December 8, 1999, Belarus's de facto president, Alaksandar Łukašenka, signed — for the third time since 1996 — a treaty with the Kremlin declaring a union state with Russia, a majority of Belarusans, as most recent polls indicate, want to preserve sovereignty even in a federation with Russia. And Lukashenka himself, known to have admitted that for him "Belarus is past history"(*Belorussiya dlya menya - proydennyy etap*), claims to be preserving the sovereignty of his republic by moving closer to Russia. Many observers think he does so more for practical than ideological reasons. Łukašenka needs national statehood as a political springboard toward a career at a higher level and, in case of failure, as a retreat zone.

2. There is a great difference in the demographic structure of Belarusan society today. Its urban cohort now makes up 69 percent, almost seven times lager than in 1900. While at the start of the century only two percent of Belarusans lived in cities, now they make up over 73 percent.[5] Urban centers, especially Miensk, although predominantly Russian -speaking, have become hotbeds of political activism in defense of sovereignty and independence. The villages meanwhile, in spite of the predominance of the Belarusan language there, have turned themselves in political terms into fortress of conservatism and nostalgia for Soviet times.

3. The national intelligentsia is more numerous today and more variegated in its ideological views and professional

skills than at the beginning of the century. There are more specialists and experts with experience in administration and governance. Although the supporters of the national cause among the intelligentsia are said to be no more than ten percent of the total, many among the majority, as the early 1990s demonstrated, could switch sides under more favorable circumstances. What is significant in the present situation, according to some experts, is the predominance of the young and better educated among the national intelligentsia. Of course, the electorate as a whole remains highly gullible, being exposed only to the official media and that is what explains difficulties encountered by the opposition in challenging the governmental authorities.

4. Unlike the beginning of the century, Belarusan language now is fully developed with an impressive body of belle lettres and a full-fledged vocabulary as testified by the current publication of the 18-volume universal Belarusan Encyclopedia. On the other hand, Russification has made tremendous inroads. If the results of the February 1999 census are to be believed, Belarusan is spoken at home by 36.7 percent of the population and Russian by 62.8 percent. The numerical retreat of Belarusan and its corrosion into a so-called *trasianka* (a pidgin vernacular - a mixture of two languages) has been powerfully influenced by the information revolution. Russian is predominant not only on the national television and radio, but it also is widely listened to on TV channels transmitted from Russia. While Belarus of the 1900s was monolingual at its vast rural base, today it is bilingual throughout the republic with a clear predominance of Russian. However, one has to distinguish between linguistic and political Russification. Russian in Belarus could be as much a language of independence as Belarusan. The Miensk researcher, Oleg Manayev, discussing a "sociological photo" of Łukašenka's supporters says that the "opposite sociological type" is "a young educated Miensker, actively engaged in entrepreneurship, who speaks Russian, supports Belarus's independence and is West-oriented."[6] Other examples of Russian being used for the Belarusan national cause are bilingual independent newspapers (*Narodnaja Vola, Naviny, Svaboda, Raboču* and others) using Russian-language commentaries to expose the treasonous nature of the regime and to advocate the republic's independence.

5. In contrast to the 1900s, in contemporary Belarus a number of institutes, including political parties, universities, publishers, professional associations, creative unions, and a variety of NGOs, are advancing the cause of national independence.The concept of Belarusan nationality itself has widened. Beside the national language, there are civil and political values that comprise national consciousness and define modern Belarusan nationality. According to the February 1999 census, 81 percent of the population consider themselves to be Belarusans while only 37 percent of the total said they speak Belarusan at home. This means that many of those who use Russian in their families still value their Belarusan nationality, which in many cases includes the idea of national independence, including a rebirth of the national language.

6. Unlike the start of the century, there is a politically active Belarusan diaspora in many Western countries, especially in the United States, which has been growing lately through legal and illegal arrivals from Belarus. In spite of their relatively small numbers, emigres contributed to a degree, especially during the Cold War years, to securing support of Western governments for the idea of Belarus's independence. On the other hand, much of what has been published in the West by emigres in terms of previously inaccessible historic documents and literary heritage as well as original pieces of writing has found its way into publications in Belarus and has influenced intellectuals in Belarus. There has also been modest financial support by the emigre communities during the 1990s for various political and cultural initiatives in Belarus directed toward confirmation of national aspirations.

7. The role of the outside world in support of the Belarusan national cause — the latter being closely associated with the promotion of democracy and the defense of human rights — has been quite significant, particularly in recent years. Partially, this support resulted from the general reaction of the West to the collapse of the "Evil Empire," but not totally. There have been favorable responses on the part of Western governments and individual politicians to initiatives of Belarusan diaspora communities. All in all, the cause of an independent democratic Belarus has been gaining in popularity, particularly since Alaksandar Łukašenka came to power. The former speaker of the Belarusan parliament, Stanisłaŭ Šuškevič, who was one of a 9-member group representing the Coordinating Council of the opposition political parties at the Istanbul OSCE summit last November, aired his satisfaction with the world's familairity with the situation in Belarus. "We thought," he said, "that we would have to convince people [about human rights infringements in Belarus], but there were practically no questions. There were only inquiries how the situation will develop further and what the details were about developments taking place in Belarus." [7]

Conclusion

As I noted at the beginning, I have not pretended to be exhaustive with my indicators in comparing the first and the last decades of the twentieth century. There are other areas which one ought to take into consideration, such as the economy, military, religion, art, etc. But analysis of these spheres, I think, would only confirm my main conclusion, which is:

The basic trend of the century has been a growth of attributes in Belarus affirming the status of an independent nation. There are signs that this trend will deepen and widen as a new generation of politicians and intelligentsia comes into play. The defense of national statehood will remain in the foreground of the political struggle because of the national bureaucracy's vested interests as well as appreciation of cultural values, which are widely cherished and which can be advanced only through political statehood and a democratic order. These two features — independence and democracy — will remain in the near future fundamental objectives for the opposition that seems to be growing.

NOTES

1. Francišak Bahuševič. *Tvory* (Minsk: Bielarus', 1967), p. 17. 2. *Entsiklopedicheski Slovar'*, Vol. 5 (St. Petersburg: Brockhaus-Yefron, 1891), p. 231. 3. A. A. Rakov. *Naseleniye BSSR* (Minsk: Nauka i tekhnika, 1969), p. 140. 4. *Belarusian Review*. Winter 1994/95, p. 2. 5. S. A. Polski. *Bielarusy. Atlas. Etnahrafija. Demahrafija. Dyjaspara. Kanfiesii.* (Minsk: Kamitet dziaržaŭnych znakaŭ pry Ministerstvie finansaŭ Respubliki Bielarus', 1996): p. 12. 6. D. Ye. Furman, ed. *Belorussiya i Rosiiya: obshchestva i gosudarstva* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo "*Prava cheloveka*,", 1998), p. 289. 7. *RL's Belarusan Service*, November 21, 1999.

Jan Zaprudnik is Vice-President of the US-based Belarusan Institute of Arts and Sciences and author of Belarus: At a crossroads in History *(1993) and* Historical Dictionary of Belarus *(1998)*

NEWS BRIEFS

Chronicle of Events

January 26, 2000

LUKASHENKA ELECTED CHAIRMAN OF THE SUPREME STATE COUNCIL OF THE UNION OF BELARUS AND RUSSIA

... former Kremlin top official Pavel Borodin was elected the Union's Secretary of State (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 11 January 2000). ... Russian acting President Putin said that the main goal of the Union is "to improve the living standards of ordinary Russians and Belarussians." (RFE/RL Newsline, January 26)

February 3, 2000

UNITED STATES' TALBOTT MEETS BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION FIGURES

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott held talks with Supreme Soviet speaker Syamyon Sharetski, former speaker Stanislau Shushkevich, and deputy Lyudmila Hraznova in Washington on 3 February. "They discussed the Russian-Belarusian union and its possible implications for the future of Belarus. [Talbott] reaffirmed U.S. support for democracy, which the independent Belarusian nation chose in 1991," the U.S. State Department commented. Talbott expressed his concern over the Belarusian authorities' intention to implement the recently passed electoral code, which is widely regarded as not meeting international standards. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 7)

February 11, 2000

BELARUS, RUSSIA FORM WEAPONS PRODUCTION GROUP

Belarus on 11 February signed an agreement with Russia to set up a financial-industrial group called Defense Systems. The group, which merges two Belarusian and 17 Russian weapons companies, will produce and sell modern air defense equipment. Russian Deputy Premier Ilya Klebanov said Russia will sell $4.5 billion worth of weapons in 2000, and he proposed that Minsk help produce them. President Alyaksandr Lukashenka accepted that proposal, saying the military-industrial complex of Belarus and Russia will become "a knot that will tie both countries into a union state," according to RFE/RL's Belarusian Service.(RFE/RL Newsline, February 14)

February 14, 2000

BELARUSIAN YOUTH FRONT MARKS ST. VALENTINE'S DAY IN MINSK

Some 1,000 young people on 14 February took part in a Minsk march and a rally organized by the opposition Youth Front under the slogan "Belarus to Europe!" Belapan reported. Earlier the same day, the Youth Front handed an appeal to 12 embassies in Minsk calling for international support and solidarity with Belarus's youth, which, it said, "is in favor of a free, democratic, and truly European Belarus." (RFE/RL Newsline, February 15)

February 16, 2000

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT SIGNS CONTROVERSIAL ELECTORAL CODE

Belarusian Television on 15 February reported that Alyaksandr Lukashenka has signed the new electoral code. The same day, experts from the Consultative Council of Opposition Political Parties noted in Minsk that the code does not meet internationally accepted standards for holding elections. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 16)

February 18, 2000

BELARUS HAS NEW PREMIER...

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 18 February dismissed Prime Minister Syarhey Linh and appointed Uladzimir Yarmoshyn as acting head of the cabinet. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 21)

...BUT LITTLE PROSPECT OF POLICY CHANGE

Lukashenka told Interfax on 20 February that he chose Yarmoshyn because of the latter's "skills as an industrialist and a builder," which, he said, Yarmoshyn demonstrated in running the Belarusian capital. ... former Premier Mikhail Chyhir and former National Bank Chairman Stanislau Bahdankevich, who are now in opposition, told Belapan that Belarus's economic course is determined by the president and that the change of cabinet head will therefore not mean any changes in the country's economic policies.(RFE/RL Newsline, February 21)

February 24, 2000

BELARUS, RUSSIA SIGN FOREIGN-POLICY AGREEMENT

Belarusian Foreign Minister Ural Latypau and his Russian counterpart, Igor Ivanov, signed a foreign policy cooperation agreement in Minsk on 24 February, Belapan reported. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 25)

March 10, 2000

U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION HOLDS HEARING ON BELARUS

The U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, held a hearing on Belarus in Washington on 10 March, an RFE/RL correspondent reported. ... The commission also heard testimonies by Belarusian opposition politicians Syamyon Sharetski, Stanislau Shushkevich, and Anatol Lyabedzka. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 10)

March 15, 2000 2000

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION MARCHES TO DEMAND FREEDOM, POLITICAL TALKS...

An estimated 20,000 opponents of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime on 15 March participated in the Freedom March-2 in Minsk, which ended peacefully with a rally and rock concert. Protesters shouted slogans urging Lukashenka's resignation, demanding political freedom, and calling for Belarus's integration with Europe. ... "We come out in favor of Belarus's return to Europe instead of dragging it into the empire which is bogged down in war and corruption," another oppositionist, Vintsuk Vyachorka, was quoted as saying.(RFE/RL Newsline, March 16)

...GETS SUPPORT IN EUROPEAN CAPITALS

Sweden's Social Democratic Party held rallies in Stockholm and Kiruna on 15 March to coincide with the Freedom March-2 and opened a Web site to raise public awareness of the opposition movement in Belarus, AP reported. RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported that rallies of solidarity with the Minsk march took place in front of the Belarusian embassies in Brussels, Warsaw, and Kyiv. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 16)

March 25, 2000

BELARUSIAN POLICE ARREST 500 TO FOIL OPPOSITION MARCH...

Belarusian riot police detained some 500 people in Minsk on 25 March to prevent the Belarusian opposition from stag-

ing a march to commemorate the creation of the non-Bolshevik Belarusian Democratic Republic in 1918. ... Among those arrested were Belarusian Popular Front activists as well as some 40 journalists and several international observers. The majority of the arrested were released the same day, but some 100 people have remained in custody, including opposition leaders Anatol Lyabedzka, Viktar Ivashkevich, and Yuras Belenki. Despite the police action, protesters held a 7,000-strong rally on the outskirts of the city.(RFE/RL Newsline, March 27)

...BEAT JOURNALISTS, SMASH TV CAMERAS

During the arrests, police beat correspondents for Russian Public Television and Russian Television and smashed their cameras, Belapan reported. According to ITAR-TASS, Russian television crews were released following acting Russian President Vladimir Putin's intervention. RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported that police also beat its Minsk correspondent Aleh Hruzdzilovich. The Belarusian Helsinki Committee said that on 25 March the Belarusian authorities committed "unprecedented, mass violations of human rights," adding that numerous detained protesters and passers-by were beaten with truncheons. Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who was in the United Arab Emirates on the day of the march, approved the police action in advance, according to Belarusian Television. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 27)

ECONOMY

SMALL BUSINESS DOOMED IN BELARUS? — The Free Trade Union of Outdoor Market Vendors in Mahileu has advised its members "to take leave" until February, Belapan reported on 10 January. The union believes that new value-added tax regulations will prevent vendors from making a profit. As of 1 January, vendors must pay a 20 percent VAT twice: on the customs value of goods at the border and on monthly sales. Many vendors have not started working so far this month in the hope that the new regulation will soon be revised. Small business entrepreneurs are planning a rally in Minsk on 31 January, at which they are expected to decide on a nationwide strike beginning 1 February. The action will be in protest at the "limitation of rights of small businesses," "Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta" reported on 10 January. (RFE/RL Newsline, January 11)

BELARUS APPROVES 2000 BUDGET IN SECOND READING. — The Chamber of Representatives on 12 January adopted the 2000 budget in the second reading, Belapan reported. The bill projects budgetary revenues at 1.49 trillion redenominated Belarusian rubles ($1.84 billion, according to the exchange rate in commercial banks) and spending at 1.61 trillion rubles. It also stipulates that the country's foreign debt should not exceed $2 billion by the end of 2000. (RFE/RL Newsline, January 13)

BELARUSIAN CABINET APPROVES PLAN TO BOOST AGRICULTURAL OUTPUT — The government on 13 January approved a program to increase the productivity of the agricultural sector, Interfax reported. Deputy Premier Alyaksandr Papkou said the situation in the sector is "disastrous" and could lead to "socioeconomic destabilization" in the country. Papkou noted that animal husbandry last year ran at a loss, the agricultural sector's debt reached 140 billion Belarusian rubles ($173 million), and nearly 50 percent of all collective farms suffered losses. Also on 13 January, the cabinet raised the state purchase price of meat by 12 percent and of milk by 24 percent. Papkou argued that it will be necessary to raise those prices again next month, otherwise farms will lack money for spring sowing. (RFE/RL Newsline, January 14)

HALF OF BELARUSIANS 'HARDLY MAKE BOTH ENDS MEET.' — According to a poll held among 1,200 Belarusians by the Ministry of Economy in December, 49 percent of respondents said they "hardly make both ends meet." Of those polled, 59 percent said their material situation worsened over the past six months, 31 percent saw no change, and 8 percent said it improved. Thirty-three percent expect a further deterioration of their material situation, 29 percent foresee stabilization, and 12 percent believe their situation will improve in the next six months.(RFE/RL Newsline, January 17)

BELARUS INTRODUCES CUSTOMS DECLARATIONS ON RUSSIAN BORDER — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has issued an edict requiring the declaration of goods shipped across the border with Russia as of 1 February, Belapan reported on 27 January. Valery Yarasheuski, of Belarus's State Customs Committee, said customs declarations will be required solely for statistical purposes, and there will be no customs control on the Belarusian-Russian border as before. Yarasheuski added that customs declarations jointly with so-called "contract certificates" regarding the shipped goods must be submitted to the customs authorities before the date of export shipment or within a 15-day period after the date of import. Those failing to submit the declarations will have to pay fines amounting to 10 percent of the contract value of shipped goods. (RFE/RL Newsline, January 28)

BELARUSIAN VENDORS DEMAND END TO 'ROBBERY' OF SMALL BUSINESSES — Some 1,500 outdoor market vendors held a rally in Minsk on 31 January to protest the authorities' policies with regard to small businesses, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. The rally was organized under the slogans "Stop robbing entrepreneurs!" and "Private ownership is untouchable." Protestors demanded that the authorities revoke value-added tax for small businesses as well as the fines for administrative offenses that were recently increased tenfold. The rally also demanded that President Alyaksandr Lukashenka "stop the genocide of his nation" and resign. Former Premier Mikhail Chyhir told the rally that the state is deliberately pursuing a policy aimed at destroying Belarusian entrepreneurship. Beginning 1 February, Belarusian outdoor market vendors are to stage a month-long nationwide strike. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 1)

BELARUS' PRIVATE VENDORS LAUNCH NATIONWIDE STRIKE... — According to Valery Levaneuski, leader of the strike committee of private outdoor-market vendors, some 90,000 such salespeople throughout Belarus launched a month-long strike on 1 February to protest what they consider the government's discriminatory policy toward small businesses, Belapan reported. The protesters demand that the government revoke value-added tax for small businesses and fines for administrative offenses, which were recently increased. They also want the fixed income tax frozen at last year's rate and an end to extortion on the part of the police, tax inspectors, and market administrations. Levaneuski does not rule out that the authorities will resort to using strikebreakers. He noted that Belarus's outdoor market vendors provide 50 percent of the revenues for local budgets and 20 percent for the central budget. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 2)

...WHILE LUKASHENKA THREATENS TO 'REMOVE' THEM FROM MARKETS — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 1 February threatened to "remove from mar-

kets all those striking today," adding that supplies would be ordered directly from wholesale traders, Belarusian Television reported. "[The private vendors] have started to blackmail the authorities, they have already started to blackmail me. So we will find wholesale traders and deliver the goods [the vendors] sell at prices five times higher, making a profit on this and also financing the opposition," Lukashenka noted. According to the president, the protesters are "talkers, not entrepreneurs" because they "are thrusting their hands into politics." At a rally in Minsk the previous day, outdoor market vendors demanded the resignation of Minister of Entrepreneurship Alyaksandr Sazonau, State Tax Committee head Mikalay Dzyamchuk, and Lukashenka.(RFE/RL Newsline, February 2)

BELARUSIAN VENDORS CLAIM SUCCESS IN NATIONWIDE STRIKE — The Free Trade Union of Entrepreneurs on 2 February said the first two days of the nationwide strike by outdoor-market vendors have been a success, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. The union said "almost all" Belarusian vendors are taking part in the action, which is to protest what they consider excessive taxation and pressure from the administration on small businesses. Meanwhile, the authorities appear to be preparing an uncompromising stance on the protest. The president pledged the previous day to employ "wholesale traders" as strike-breakers (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 2 February 2000). And State Tax Committee Chairman Mikalay Dzyamchuk told the 2 February "Zvyazda" that private vendors account for only 1 percent of central budget revenues.(RFE/RL Newsline, February 3)

BELARUSIAN VENDORS TO HALT STRIKE? — Valery Levaneuski, leader of the Free Trade Union of Entrepreneurs, told RFE/RL's Belarusian Service on 7 February that the nationwide strike currently being staged by outdoor-market vendors may be halted "in a few days" (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 3 February 2000). Levaneuski noted that the strike has not been a failure, but he admitted that the union has lost an "information battle" with the authorities which, he said, "consistently and deliberately misinformed" the protesters by pledging to meet their demands if they resumed work. Meanwhile, Belarusian Television reported that the authorities have admitted "for the first time" that tax inspectors, police, and market administrators have resorted to unauthorized "inspections" and "punitive sanctions" vis-a-vis outdoor-market vendors. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 3)

BELARUS READY TO ADOPT RUSSIAN RUBLE AS NATIONAL CURRENCY — The Belarusian National Bank has prepared a draft agreement on setting up a single money-issuing center for the Belarusian-Russian Union, Belapan reported on 2 February. The Belarusian side will soon send the document for approval to Russia's Central Bank. The Belarusian National Bank told Belapan that it had shown "flexibility and, taking into consideration the existing economic realities, agreed to accept Russia's national currency as the basis for the creation of a Union single monetary unit." The 3 February "Kommersant-Daily" quoted Belarusian chief banker Pyotr Prakapovich as saying the document calls for the temporary existence of two money-issuing centers until a Union central bank is established. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 4)

BELARUSIAN VENDORS TO END STRIKE — The strike committee of Belarusian outdoor-market vendors announced on 8 February that they will end their nationwide strike on 12 February, Belapan reported. The committee said that "the authorities have admitted their mistakes and announced their readiness to begin negotiations" with the Free Trade Union of Entrepreneurs. The main demand of the Belarusian outdoor-market vendors is that those who pay a fixed income tax no longer be required to pay value-added tax. The strike, which had been scheduled to continue throughout February, was broken this week after the authorities persuaded a rival trade union of outdoor-market vendors not to join the protest. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 9)

BELARUSIAN DRIVERS BLOCK CHECKPOINT AT RUSSIAN BORDER — On 13 February, some 300 Belarusian truck drivers blocked the Brest-Moscow highway for five hours at a checkpoint on the Russian border to protest the amount of time Russian customs officials take to check their documents, Belarusian Television reported the next day. The line of vehicles on the Belarusian side of the border stretched back some six kilometers. According to Belarus's State Customs Committee, the main reason for the protest is the Russian requirement that Belarusian drivers buy "special permits" to enter Russia. The committee made no other comment about the protest action.(RFE/RL Newsline, February 15)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENTS SIGNS LAND SALE DECREE — Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 25 February signed a degree allowing the transfer of land to legal entities, including companies partly or entirely owned by foreigners, Belapan reported. The decree states the president decides on the sale of land to legal entities. In other news, the Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus on 26 February announced that it will participate in this fall's parliamentary elections, Belapan reported. The same day, the United Civic Party announced that it will decide whether to participate in the elections at a meeting later on this year. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 28)

IMF NOTES 'SERIOUS CONTRADICTIONS' IN BELARUSIAN ECONOMY — Mark Horton, IMF permanent representative for Lithuania and Belarus, told journalists in Minsk on 4 March that Belarus's economic policies have improved since last year but still have inherent contradictions, Belapan reported. Horton approved recent steps to liberalize the foreign exchange market but expressed disappointment at last week's presidential edict obliging Belarusian exporters to sell a 40 percent share of their hard-currency proceeds to the government. Horton added that the government's plan to borrow 76 billion rubles ($86 million) from the National Bank this year means fewer opportunities for the National Bank to liberalize the exchange rate. The IMF also disapproves of large loans that Belarus's agricultural sector is expected to receive this year from commercial banks. According to Horton, the IMF wants the National Bank to state clearly that it will not guarantee these loans in any form. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 6)

WILL BELARUS' COWS SURVIVE UNTIL SPRING? — Collective farms in Vitsebsk and Hrodna Oblasts have begun to allow cattle to graze in fields, despite snow and the lack of fresh grass, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 7 March. Hungry animals feed on bushes and last year's dried grass. An RFE/RL correspondent noted that Belarus has not witnessed such a practice since the years of famine that immediately followed World War II. The reason for the early grazing is the acute shortage of fodder on Belarusian farms and President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's decree to maintain livestock by any possible means. Some farms feed cattle with fir twigs, dried bulrush, and weeds dug out from under the ice on frozen lakes. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 8)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT CLAIMS SUCCESS IN UAE — Alyaksandr Lukashenka concluded his five-day visit to the United Arab Emirates on 30 March, Belarusian Television reported. According to the television station, the results of the trip were better than expected. Lukashenka signed accords on economic cooperation, the avoidance of double taxa-

tion, and mutual support to investors. "These are very important agreements.... I think the process [of Belarus-UAE cooperation] will be accelerated," Lukashenka commented. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 31)

BELARUSIAN LEGISLATURE ENDORSES BILL ON BANKRUPTCY — The Chamber of Representatives has passed in the first r eading a bill on bankruptcy, Belapan reported on 4 April. The bill lists the grounds on which debtors may be declared bankrupt, describes bankruptcy procedures, and regulates other aspects of the insolvency, reorganization, and liquidation of economic entities. The bill applies to non-state companies, cooperatives, and foundations. Meanwhile, Supreme Economic Court Deputy Chairman Viktar Kamyankou told the legislature that as of 1 February, 40 percent of state-run companies were loss-making and 46 percent are currently insolvent, of which only 14 percent have a chance to recover solvency within six months. He added that 4 percent of such companies are virtual bankrupts. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 5)

POLITICS

LUKASHENKA WANTS WARMER TIES WITH U.S., AS LINKS WITH MOSCOW REPORTED COOL — The Belarusian president told foreign diplomats in Minsk on 13 December that he hopes for "understanding and a positive assessment" of Belarus's current efforts "to heal its relations" with the U.S., Belarusian Television reported. "We are ready for a dialogue with the U.S. side on a whole range of problems and hope that our partners will choose the same format," Lukashenka added. Lukashenka's conciliatory tone follows what some Belarusian officials see as a slowdown in the Belarusian-Russian rapprochement after Vladimir Putin's takeover at the Kremlin (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 6 January 2000). "Everything that was agreed with [Boris] Yeltsin has been frozen," Belarusian lawmaker Valery Drako told Reuters the same day. Drako added that the session of the Belarus-Russia Parliamentary Assembly scheduled for 14 January has been postponed "indefinitely."(RFE/RL Newsline, January 14);

BELARUSIAN OFFICIAL SAYS NO TIME FOR TALKS WITH OPPOSITION — Uladzimir Kanaplyou, deputy chairman of the Chamber of Representatives, told the 22 January "Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta" that the opposition "has already lost its chance to begin a dialogue" on holding parliamentary elections. According to Kanaplyou, the legislature must now urgently adopt an Electoral Code in order to make parliamentary elections possible this year. Kanaplyou said the opposition has not provided any proposals for the code but offered a different election bill which, in his opinion, contradicts the 1996 constitution. The Belarusian opposition does not recognize the constitution adopted in the 1996 controversial referendum and argues that Belarus's current legislature has no real power. (RFE/RL Newsline, January 24)

OSCE CONSIDERS BELARUSIAN ELECTORAL CODE FLAWED — The Chamber of Representatives on 24 January passed an Electoral Code, which regulates the electoral process in Belarus. Belarusian Television commented that the legislature has done "as much as possible" to ensure that this year's parliamentary elections will be held in a "democratic, free, and transparent" way. Meanwhile, the Warsaw-based OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights said the draft code was prepared "badly," according to Interfax. The bureau believes that the document does not provide for a "multiparty or pluralistic composition" of the Central Electoral Commission and makes it possible for the authorities to exercise control over all electoral commissions. The code is said to include excessive restrictions that "nullify the possibilities to hold bright energetic campaigning and violate the right to the freedom of speech." The bureau concludes that the code does not comply with Belarus's obligations to the OSCE. (RFE/RL Newsline, January 25)

COUNCIL OF EUROPE SAYS BELARUS STILL NOT MEETING EUROPEAN STANDARDS — The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on 26 January "expressed its profound concern that Belarus continues to fall seriously short of Council of Europe standards as regards pluralist democracy, the rule of law and human rights," Belapan reported. After hearing a report on the situation in Belarus by Wolfgang Behrendt, rapporteur of the Political Affairs Committee, the assembly decided not to restore the Belarusian legislature's special guest status, which was suspended after the controversial November 1996 referendum in Belarus. The assembly also noted that the democratic legitimacy of Belarusian power institutions can only be restored "through political dialogue between the authorities and the opposition culminating in democratic elections." (RFE/RL Newsline, January 27)

BELARUS TO HOLD TWO PARLIAMENTARY BALLOTS THIS YEAR? — Pavel Shypuk, chairman of Belarus's upper house, told journalists on 28 January that elections to the parliament of the Belarusian-Russian union will likely be held in the fall of 2000, at the same time as the planned parliamentary elections in Belarus, Belapan reported. According to Shypuk, such a scenario was discussed at a 26 January meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Belarus-Russia Union in Moscow. Shypuk added that Russia is also planning to hold elections to the union parliament this fall. (RFE/RL Newsline, January 31)

BELARUS' UPPER HOUSE APPROVES ELECTORAL CODE — The Council of the Republic on 31 January passed an electoral code. Both the OSCE and the Belarusian opposition had requested that the code be drawn up by means of a political dialogue, but the authorities refused to start negotiations with the opposition. Foreign Minister Syarhey Martynau said the same day that Belarus is ready to hold free and democratic parliamentary elections under the new code. Martynau also accused the opposition of refusing to negotiate with the government. Meanwhile, a deputy of the Chamber of Representatives has announced he will initiate legislative hearings on the "expediency" of allowing missions of international organizations to function in Minsk. Such missions, he argued, "destabilize the situation in Belarus and misinform" Europe about the situation in the country, Belapan reported.(RFE/RL Newsline, February 1)

OSCE STILL HOPES FOR DIALOGUE IN BELARUS — Hans Georg Wieck, head of the OSCE consultative and monitoring group in Minsk, has proposed that Belarusian opposition parties hold an "informal meeting" with representatives of the authorities, Belapan reported on 2 February. Quoting

Foreign Minister Ural Latypau, Wieck said the government delegation for talks with the opposition has not been dissolved, even if President Alyaksandr Lukashenka had fired its head, Mikhail Sazonau, and "frozen" an agreement on the opposition's access to state-controlled media. The OSCE has not yet taken an official stance on the electoral code that was recently adopted by the Belarusian legislature without consultations with the opposition. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 3)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT SAYS NO NEGOTIATIONS WITH OPPOSITION. — Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 10 February said he is not going "to sit at either a round or square or any other table with the opposition," RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. He added that "as a political factor, the opposition is unable to influence the situation in the country in any way." And he noted that he has not authorized anybody to hold negotiations with the opposition, saying that the authorities are ready to participate in "a general political dialogue, but not in negotiations." Lukashenka was speaking at a cabinet meeting devoted to Belarus's foreign-policy guidelines, where he stated that international recognition of the 2000 parliamentary elections in Belarus will be a "decisive factor" in stabilizing the country's foreign-policy course. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 11)

BELARUSIAN-RUSSIAN INTEGRATION TO PROCEED AHEAD OF SCHEDULE? — Russian First Deputy Premier Mikhail Kasyanov, who is also head of the Russia-Belarus Union government, met with Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Belarusian Premier Syarhey Linh in Minsk on 16 February to discuss the harmonization of the two countries' customs and tax legislation. Kasyanov said the sides might unify their customs and tax legislation as soon as in 2001, one year ahead of the schedule stipulated in the union treaty. Contrary to Minsk's expectations, the sides did not discuss issuing a Russian stabilization credit to prop up the Belarusian currency, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. Kasyanov and Linh announced that the 2000 union budget will amount to 2.2 billion Russian rubles ($76 million). Belarus will contribute 35 percent of that sum. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 17)

EUROPEAN DEPUTIES VOICE CONCERN ABOUT BELARUS'S ELECTORAL CODE... — Wolfgang Berendt, a special rapporteur from the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, told RFE/RL's Belarusian Service on 17 February that he is "very disappointed" that Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's signed the new electoral code, which was adopted without consultations with the opposition. Berendt added that Belarus will neither be accepted as a member of the council nor given EU economic support if it holds parliamentary elections based on that code. Elisabeth Schroedter, head of the European Parliament group for Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine, said Lukashenka's signing of the code signals an end to attempts by European organizations "to bring Belarus back to democracy in a peaceful way." Schroedter noted that the elections held according to that code might result in the "complete isolation" of Belarus. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 18)

...WHILE MINSK OFFICIALS SAY CODE 'QUITE DEMOCRATIC.' — Central Electoral Commission Chairwoman Lidziya Yarmoshyna told journalists in Minsk the same day that the adopted electoral code is "quite democratic." She claimed that code was positively assessed by the Council of Europe's Venetian Commission and includes "almost all" proposals made by the OSCE. Yarmoshyna believes that Europe will recognize this year's parliamentary elections as legitimate. Anatol Krasutski from the Chamber of Representatives said he is confident that some opposition parties will take part in the elections, including the Party of Communists, the Liberal Democratic Party, and the Women's Party "Hope." (RFE/RL Newsline, February 18)

POPULAR FRONT SAYS RUSSIANS IN 'PRACTICALLY ALL' KEY POSTS IN BELARUS — Alyaksey Kavalets, secretary of the opposition Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), told Belapan on 19 February that Yarmoshyn's appointment means that "practically all" key posts in Belarus have now been assumed by migrants from Russia. The 57-year-old Yarmoshyn was born in Russia's Ryazan Oblast, while First Deputy Premier Uladzimir Zamyatalin, Defense Minister Alyaksandr Chumakou, Interior Minister Yury Sivakou, and Foreign Minister Ural Latypau are also from Russia. According to the BNF leadership, Lukashenka is preparing to abolish Belarusian sovereignty and that his personnel policy is intended to serve this goal, the agency reported. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 21)

EUROPE'S 'PARLIAMENTARY TROIKA' TO SEEK POLITICAL AGREEMENT IN BELARUS... — The European Parliament, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the OSCE have decided to combine their efforts to encourage talks between the authorities and the opposition in Belarus and send a "parliamentary troika" to Minsk on 2 March. The troika will include Jan Wiersma (EP), Wolfgang Berendt (PACE), and Adrian Severin (OSCE). The troika's declared goal is to "encourage all sides involved in political discussions to reach agreement on new electoral legislation, on the role and functions of the future parliament which will emerge from [this fall's] elections, and on the position of the media." The troika will hold bilateral meetings with opposition parties, NGOs, and government officials. It also hopes to meet with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 1)

...WHILE BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION WANTS TALKS WITHOUT 'DIKTAT — ' The Consultative Council of Belarusian Opposition Parties on 29 February said their dialogue with the authorities should not be based on "ultimatum-like conditions and diktat," Belapan reported. Simultaneously, the council expressed its readiness to hold talks with the authorities "within the format agreed upon in 1999 [and] with OSCE mediation." The council was responding to Lukashenka's proposal last week to hold a "broad political dialogue" without OSCE mediation. The council suspects that the proposal's real goal is to marginalize the opposition, if not to eliminate it from the dialogue process.(RFE/RL Newsline, March 1)

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES HOLD 'DIALOGUE' WITHOUT OPPOSITION... — An "initiative group for holding a social and political dialogue" under the auspices of the presidential administration gathered for its first session in Minsk on 1 March, *Belarusian Television reported*. The group convened in response to President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's recent decision to organize a "broad dialogue" in the country without OSCE mediation. According to Belarusian Television, some 40 associations and political parties have signed up for the proposed dialogue. The group decided that key topics for future discussion will be parliamentary elections and electoral legislation. Belarusian opposition parties, however, did not take part in the session. They believe that Lukashenka's dialogue initiative is based on "ultimatum-like conditions and diktat" (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 1 March 2000). (RFE/RL Newsline, March 2)

...WHILE OSCE, U.S. URGE 'GENUINE' TALKS. — OSCE Chairwoman Benita Ferrero-Waldner has called on the Belarusian government to hold a "real" political dialogue with the opposition "to overcome the constitutional controversy and the still existing discrepancies between the present version of the Electoral Code and OSCE standards," Belapan reported on 1 March. The same day, the U.S. urged Minsk to

open a "genuine" dialogue with the opposition in which the OSCE would participate. Washington called on Minsk to stop harassing opposition figures and to cease seeking the closure of independent media. "Failure to take such steps will lead to a sham dialogue, illegitimate parliamentary elections, and [will] further polarize Belarusian society and deepen the country's isolation from democratic Europe," U.S. State Secretary spokesman James Rubin noted. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 2)

EUROPE'S 'TROIKA' HOLDS TALKS WITH BELARUSIAN NGOS, PARTIES — The so-called "parliamentary troika"--which consists of representatives of the OSCE, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the European Parliament--held talks in Minsk on 2 March with representatives of Belarusian NGOs and opposition parties, Belapan reported. The sides discussed opportunities for a political dialogue in Belarus and for monitoring this fall's parliamentary elections. Belarusian democratic organizations propose that political talks with the authorities focus on the powers of a future parliament and electoral legislation. The troika is expected to meet with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 3 March. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 3)

EUROPEAN TROIKA 'CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC' ABOUT DIALOGUE IN BELARUS... — Jan Wiersma of the European Parliament told RFE/RL's Belarusian Service on 3 March that the European "troika"--the European Parliament, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the OSCE--is "cautiously optimistic" about the prospects for a dialogue between the authorities and the opposition in Belarus. A "troika" delegation visited Minsk last week to organize a roundtable meeting of government officials, NGO representatives, and oppositionists and meet with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. According to that delegation, the authorities are ready to discuss amendments to the electoral code, which does not meet European standards. The delegation admitted that Lukashenka opposes any discussion about the powers of the legislature that is to be elected this fall. PACE representative Wolfgang Berendt said Lukashenka believes that the powers of the executive and the legislature in Belarus are "perfectly" balanced, according to Belapan. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 6

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT BRIEFS OFFICIAL ON DIALOGUE'... — Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 6 March instructed Uladzimir Rusakevich, deputy head of the presidential administration staff, to hold consultations with leaders of political parties and public associations on their participation in "a dialogue of all sociopolitical forces of Belarus," Belarusian Television reported. Rusakevich, who heads a working group for organizing such a dialogue, appealed to political and public organization leaders to apply to take part in that dialogue by 15 March.(RFE/RL Newsline, March 7)

...WHILE OPPOSITION URGES ACCESS TO MEDIA — A group of media experts from the Consultative Council of Opposition Parties on 6 March said the state-controlled media continue to remain inaccessible for both opposition parties and "a majority of citizens," despite the authorities' declared intention to hold a broad dialogue in society, Belapan reported. The group notes that the official media have launched a campaign to "discredit the political opposition and democratic ideas" in Belarus. The opposition urges the authorities to comply with last year's bilateral accord on opposition parties' access to state-run media.(RFE/RL Newsline, March 7)

NUCLEAR WEAPONS TO RETURN TO BELARUS? — Citing a source "close to Belarus's top leadership," the 7 March "Novye izvestiya" reported that Moscow and Minsk have reached "an agreement in principle" on returning nuclear weapons to Belarus. The newspaper said missiles with nuclear warheads may reappear in Belarus "as soon as in 2000." According to the newspaper, nuclear missiles could be located in former silos or on former launch pads, but a "more likely" option for Moscow is to deploy mobile launching systems and strategic bombers carrying nuclear weapons. "Novye izvestiya" speculates that Russian generals are urging the redeployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus and that such a move would secure Lukashenka's political future.(RFE/RL Newsline, March 7)

OSCE MISSION: BELARUS'S ELECTORAL CODE DOES NOT MEET DEMOCRATIC STANDARDS — The OSCE Consultative and Monitoring Group in Minsk has released its findings on Belarus's electoral code, which President Alyaksandr Lukashenka signed into law last month, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 8 March. The group concluded that the code does not meet international democratic standards. In particular, it said the code stipulates an undemocratic composition of the 12-strong Central Electoral Commission, whose members are appointed by the president (six) and the upper chamber (six). The group proposed last year that the commission include representatives of political parties. The group also noted that the code does not provide for any "public observers," thus undermining the possibility of independent international and domestic monitoring of the election process. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 9)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT PLEDGES TO STICK TO FORMER POLICIES... — Speaking to the Chamber of Representatives on 14 March, Alyaksandr Lukashenka said Belarus's "strategic course" chosen five years ago is correct and must not be changed, even though some "tactical problems" have not yet been resolved, Belarusian Television reported. He noted that the government will not liberalize the economy or privatize state-run enterprises. At the same time, he admitted that Belarusians have a poor standard of living but pledged improvements in 2000, provided that "God grants us a good year." According to Lukashenka, Belarus's foreign policy during his term was the "only possible" one. He added that Minsk wants to have good relations with the West and expressed surprise that the West does not accept Belarus's "sovereign, independent policy."(RFE/RL Newsline, March 15)

...THREATENS TO DEAL HARSHLY WITH OPPOSITION — Touching upon the opposition Freedom March-2 scheduled for 15 March, Lukashenka said he was surprised by the Minsk authorities' decision to allow the opposition to hold such an action. He added that he had been confronted with a fait accompli and was powerless to change it. According to Lukashenka, Belarusian oppositionists are sponsored by the U.S., which, he said, provided them with $108 million over the past year in an attempt to "destroy Belarus." Lukashenka warned participants in the march that if they take "only one step to the left or to the right of the law," the police ensure that "the stuffing is knocked out of them." In his opinion, there will be no more than 1,500 "dregs" taking part in the march. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 15)

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES CONTINUE TO PREPARE DIALOGUE WITHOUT OPPOSITION — Belarusian Television reported on 20 March that 81 organizations have expressed their readiness to participate in the "social dialogue" proposed by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The dialogue is expected to start by the end of March and focus on five topics: elections, mass media, economic situation, civil society and human rights, and Belarus's sovereignty and foreign policy. Belarusian opposition parties consider Lukashenka's initiative a "window-dressing" campaign and have decided only to send experts to discussion groups without applying for formal participation. The opposition wants

negotiations that could lead to amendments in electoral legislation.(RFE/RL Newsline, March 20)

BELARUS SEEKS COOPERATION ACCORD WITH NATO — Valyantsin Rybakou, head of the department for international security in Belarus's Foreign Ministry, told journalists on 23 March that Belarus is seeking a cooperation agreement with NATO, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. Rybakou noted that Minsk proposed signing such an accord more than two years ago, but Brussels has not responded. He proposed that NATO sign a charter with Belarus similar to those the alliance has concluded with Russia and Ukraine. Rybakou noted that the Partnership for Peace program does not fully suit Belarus's interests since, he argued, it is intended for countries that want to join the alliance. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 24)

OSCE, U.S. PROTEST CRACKDOWN ON BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION RALLY — The OSCE on 28 March said it is alarmed about the "unprovoked, unjustified, and exaggerated show of police force" to disperse the Belarusian opposition rally in Minsk on 25 March (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 27 and 28 March 2000). The previous day the U.S. State Department condemned the "brutal and unjustified" crackdown on the rally, adding that "the Lukashenka regime's suppression of this demonstration makes clear its disinterest in dialogue." And U.S. State Department official Phil Reeker said "a decision on the withdrawal of [Generalized System of Preference] benefits for Belarus for failure to respect worker rights will be announced soon."(RFE/RL Newsline, March 29)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION SAYS FREE ELECTIONS IMPOSSIBLE THIS YEAR — The Consultative Council of Opposition Parties on 29 March said that free and democratic elections in Belarus cannot be held this fall owing to the "cynical crackdown" of the authorities on the peaceful 25 March rally in Minsk (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 27 and 28 March 2000), Belapan reported. The council noted that the crackdown "unambiguously demonstrated to both Belarusian society and the international community that the [Alyaksandr] Lukashenka regime will neither create a climate of trust nor negotiate a peaceful transition to democracy." The council demanded that the authorities set up a commission that includes public organization representatives in order to investigate the 25 March events and punish all responsible for the suppression of the rally, including Interior Minister Yury Sivakou and the Minsk mayor. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 30)

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES HOLD 'SOCIOPOLITICAL DIALOGUE. — Representatives of some 90 public organizations gathered in Minsk on 29 March for the first sitting of the so-called "sociopolitical dialogue" which was proposed by President Lukashenka, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. Several women's organizations appealed to the forum not to participate in the dialogue until all those responsible for human rights violations during the 25 March rally have been punished. The forum, which was to discuss procedural rules of the dialogue, passed no resolutions. The next meeting within the "sociopolitical dialogue" framework will take place in two weeks. Belarusian Language Association head Aleh Trusau announced that his organization is suspending its participation in the dialogue. Belarusian Helsinki Committee head Tatsyana Protska had a made a similar announcement earlier. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 30)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION MARKS 'UNIFICATION DAY' WITH MEMORIAL SERVICE — Some 500 people marked the anniversary of the 2 April 1997 pact on the creation of a Belarusian-Russian union state with a memorial service for those who fought for Belarus's independence in the past, Belapan reported. The service took place at the monument in Minsk to Belarusian poet Yanka Kupala. The police did not intervene even though the meeting was not authorized. The anniversary is an official holiday in Belarus called "Unification Day of the Peoples of Belarus and Russia." (RFE/RL Newsline, April 3)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT SAYS 25 MARCH CRACKDOWN WAS 'MISTAKE.' — Alyaksandr Lukashenka has said that the 25 March police action in Minsk, which led to the arrest of several hundred people, including some 40 journalists, was a "misunderstanding and mistake" (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 27 March 2000). Lukashenka pledged to journalists to "sort out" the circumstances surrounding the incident and "draw conclusions," Belarusian Television reported on 31 March. On 25 March, Lukashenka was on an official trip to the United Arab Emirates. Interior Minister Yury Sivakou told Belarusian Television after the 25 March arrests that Lukashenka had instructed him "to ensure order and security during his absence," adding that the ministry "complied with this instruction." (RFE/RL Newsline, April 3)

BELARUS RATIFIES ACCORDS ON CUSTOMS UNION, CIS COLLECTIVE SECURITY. — The Chamber of Representatives on 3 April ratified an agreement on establishing a legislative basis for the Customs Union of Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan and their single economic space, Belapan reported. The Belarusian legislature also ratified the country's adherence to a protocol on prolonging the CIS Collective Security Treaty of 15 May 1992. Earlier, the treaty was prolonged by Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Uzbekistan did not renew their participation in the treaty. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 4)

BELARUSIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN OCTOBER? — Ivan Pashkevich, deputy head of the Belarusian presidential administration, told Reuters on 6 April that the campaign for parliamentary elections is likely to start on 7 August. Under Belarus's electoral code, campaigning for the elections can begin two months before voting, meaning that the ballot might take place on 7 October. Pashkevich expressed hope that despite the opposition's call for a boycott, anti-presidential parties will take part in the vote. "Presidential supporters will beyond a doubt win the elections, but the opposition also has a chance to be elected to the parliament. If it understands that politics are not made in the back streets, it will come to the polls," Pashkevich said. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 7)

CIS VISAS WILL NO LONGER BE VALID FOR TRANSIT THROUGH BELARUS. — Foreign Ministry spokesman Mikalay Barysevich said on 6 April Belarus will start demanding transit visas from non-CIS foreigners as of 1 May, Belapan reported. Minsk decided to suspend the provision of a 1992 CIS agreement on the mutual recognition of visas, which allowed foreigners possessing a visa from any signatory country to that agreement to travel through Belarus without a Belarusian transit visa. Meanwhile, Russia's recent decision to introduce customs controls on the Belarusian-Russian border of shipments by third countries was a "total surprise" for Minsk, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service commented. Barysevich stressed that the decision does not spell the end of the Russia-Belarus Customs Union, adding that it resulted from Russia's "domestic political problems." The same day a Belarusian delegation was in Moscow to discuss the reintroduction of customs controls, but the outcome of those talks is not known. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 7)

HUMAN RIGHTS

WIFE APPEALS TO UN OVER MISSING BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONIST — Zinaida Hanchar, wife of Belarusian oppositionist Viktar Hanchar, who disappeared on 16 September 1999, has appealed to the UN Commission for Human Rights to help clarify the reasons for husband's disappearance. She told RFE/RL's Belarusian Service on 12 January that she has asked Belarusian law enforcement agencies to investigate her husband's disappearance, which she attributes to a "crime," but has received no satisfying answer. "I hope the fact that Belarus is a UN member will make [President Alyaksandr] Lukashenka stick to the norms of international law," she said. Meanwhile, some 40 Belarusian women whose husbands or children have been persecuted by Lukashenka regime have set up a Women's Initiative to assist and defend those who are oppressed in Belarus for political reasons.(RFE/RL Newsline, January 13)

FORMER BELARUSIAN MINISTER SENTENCED TO FOUR YEARS FOR $130 BRIBE — Belarus's Supreme Court on 14 January sentenced former Agricultural Minister Vasil Lyavonau to four years in prison and the confiscation of his property after being found guilty of accepting bribes totaling some $130. Lyavonau professed his innocence and said the trial and charges against him were politically motivated. Lyavonau was arrested in 1997 on charges of abuse of office, corruption, and illegal possession of weapons. President Alyaksandr Lukashenka suggested during the investigation that Lyavonau may even be involved in murder and organizing an attempt on the president's life. "I did not expect another verdict, but I'm nonetheless shocked. They made him a petty swindler! This is laughable and not serious," Lyavonau's daughter told RFE/RL's Belarusian Service. (RFE/RL Newsline, January 17)

FORMER BELARUSIAN PREMIER SAYS HIS TRIAL POLITICALLY MOTIVATED — More than 100 people, including German, French, and British diplomats, came on 19 January to the Minsk City Court for the opening of the case against former Premier Mikhail Chyhir, who is accused of abuse of office and negligence that allegedly inflicted a loss of some $4 million on the state. "This is a political trial. All the charges are falsified," Reuters quoted Chyhir as saying before the session. He added that there is "no fair court" in Belarus and that he is ready for a "political sentence." Chyhir was arrested in March 1999 after he consented to run in the opposition presidential elections that challenged President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's rule--which was prolonged by the 1996 controversial constitutional referendum. The judge adjourned the trial until a larger courtroom, able to accommodate all observers, was found. (RFE/RL Newsline, January 20)

BELARUSIAN OFFICER SAYS POLICE PROVOKED 'FREEDOM MARCH' CLASHES — Aleh Baturyn published an open letter in the 10 February issue of the independent "Narodnaya volya," accusing the police of deliberately provoking clashes during the opposition Freedom March in Minsk on 17 October 1999 (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 18 October 1999). Baturyn confessed that he, along with other plainclothes police officers, was ordered to mingle with the marchers "to provoke clashes, shout abusive slogans, and lead the people to where the police needed them." The Belarusian Interior Ministry confirmed to an RFE/RL Minsk correspondent that Baturyn is employed by the ministry's personnel department, but it refused to give his address. "We have the letter signed by the author and do not doubt its authenticity," "Narodnaya volya" chief editor Iosif Syaredzich told RFE/RL. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 10)

BELARUSIAN POLICE REPORTEDLY USE INTIMIDATION TO DISCREDIT DEFECTOR. — Mikhail Baturyn on 10 February said two men who introduced themselves as police officers insisted earlier the same day that he write a statement saying his brother Aleh, a police officer, is mentally ill, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. When Mikhail refused to comply with the demand, the men hit him and threatened to arrest his fiancee. Mikhail managed to escape from them and sought shelter with his fiancee in the Belarusian Popular Front headquarters, where he told journalists his story. His brother Aleh had published an open letter, accusing the police of provoking clashes during the opposition "Freedom March" (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 10 February 2000). "My brother is a totally sane man," Mikhail said. An RFE/RL Minsk correspondent reported that a videotape of Aleh's interview has been handed to the OSCE mission and a number of embassies in Minsk. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 11)

BELARUSIAN POLICE QUESTION DEFECTOR'S DISCLOSURES — Deputy Interior Minister Major General Yury Radzyu kevich said on 18 February that police Senior Lieutenant Aleh Baturyn will be fired for absence from work, Belapan reported. Earlier this month, Baturyn published an open letter accusing the police of provoking clashes with participants in last year's opposition Freedom March (see "RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report," 15 February 2000). Baturyn's current whereabouts are unknown. Radzyukevich said Baturyn was never ordered to take part in any police operations, including the Freedom March. He added that Baturyn may be sued for slandering the police but did not say whether the Interior Ministry will instigate criminal proceedings against him. According to Radzyukevich, Baturyn published his letter to present himself as a "prisoner of conscience" and seek political asylum abroad. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 22)

BELARUSIAN NEWSPAPERS PROTEST DISCRIMINATION — The editors in chief of Belarus's six largest independent newspapers have sent an open letter to Prime Minister Uladzimir Yarmoshyn demanding an end to the discriminatory measures that the state uses against them, Belapan reported on 23 February. The letter noted that the state postal service recently raised distribution rates for independent papers by 400-600 percent, while the state-owned publications receive distribution discounts. It also commented that the large hikes "undermine the economic basis of the non-state publications" and violate the freedom of the press. The letter was signed by the editors in chief of "Narodnaya Volya," "Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta," "Belorusskaya Gazeta," "Svobodniye Novosti," "Belorusky Rynok," and "Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii." RFE/RL Newsline, February 24)

MOTHER OF BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION LEADER APPEALS TO PUBLIC — The mother of opposition politician Viktar Hanchar appealed to the country on 23 February not to forget the still unresolved disappearance of her son, Belapan reported. Valentina Hanchar, as well as other relatives of the vanished politician, are convinced that he was kidnapped by Belarusian police last September. Government officials have said Hanchar may have staged his own disappearance. RFE/RL Newsline, February 24)

PROMINENT BELARUSIANS ASK RUSSIA FOR HELP IN FINDING MISSING POLITICIANS — A group of 100 prominent public figures in Belarus have sent a note to acting Russian President Vladimir Putin asking him to "use all opportunities and resources" to help them find out what happened to two opposition politicians who disappeared last year, Belapan reported on 24 February. The appeal, which was signed by artists, writers, and politicians, said Russia could help find the opposition politicians Viktar Hanchar and Yury Zakharanka. In other news, the Belarusian Justice Ministry

re-registered the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) "Adradzhenne" movement on 23 February, Belapan reported the next day. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 25)

U.S. SAYS BELARUSIAN HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD HAS WORSENED — In its annual report on respect for human rights worldwide, the U.S. State Department noted that Belarus's record in this area worsened last year, an RFE/RL correspondent reported on 25 February. The report noted that the Belarusian government limits the rights of citizens to bring about democratic change and that well-known politicians have disappeared inexplicably. It also said that the number of arrests increased in 1999, while police continue to beat political opponents and detainees and restrictions on the freedom of the press continue. (RFE/RL Newsline, February 28)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONIST SENTENCED TO SIX YEARS IN PRISON — A Minsk court on 17 March sentenced Andrey Klimau, a political opponent of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, to six years in prison on charges of fraud and misappropriating funds. Klimau's construction company has built some of the most prestigious apartments in Minsk, which house many senior officials from Lukashenka's administration. During the Supreme Soviet's 1996 attempt to impeach Lukashenka, Klimau had accused the president of violating the constitution and called for his arrest. Klimau's arrest in 1998 and subsequent trial is seen by the Belarusian opposition as Lukashenka's retaliation.



Andrej Klimau (Klimov)

More than 500 parliamentary deputies from throughout Europe and many international human rights organizations had called on Minsk to drop the charges against Klimau, which they saw as politically motivated. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 20)

TRIALS OF ARRESTED PROTESTERS BEGIN IN MINSK — The Savetski district court in Minsk has begun trying those arrested during the opposition rally on 25 March (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 27 March 2000), Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. According to official data, police arrested 272 people and charged 72 with having committed various administrative offenses during the rally. RFE/RL's Minsk correspondent Aleh Hruzdzilovich, who was beaten after being arrested and spent nine hours in detention, reported that many policemen who have testified provided contradictory and fabricated evidence. Most cases have been adjourned owing to contradictory testimonies or to the defendants' demand to be given lawyers. (RFE/RL Newsline, March 28)

NGO LISTS RIGHTS VIOLATIONS DURING 25 MARCH CRACKDOWN IN MINSK. — The Belarusian Helsinki Committee said on 5 April that the Belarusian authorities' crackdown on the opposition rally in Minsk on 25 March (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 27 March 2000) violated a number of human rights and freedoms guaranteed by the constitution and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, to which Belarus is a signatory, Belapan reported. In particular, the authorities denied citizens the right to hold demonstrations, unnecessarily brought in troops and armored vehicles into the capital, and resorted to random arrests and beatings of demonstrators and journalists. The committee also said that police officers fabricated testimonies "on a mass scale" at the trials of those arrested. Committee chairwoman Tatsyana Protska told RFE/RL that under such circumstances the dialogue proposed by the authorities is a "cynical and unprincipled phenomenon." (RFE/RL Newsline, April 6)

MEDIA WATCH

NEWS MEDIA

Fight for National Survival (*The Globe and Mail*, 'Aching souls of Belarus pine for liberation', March 2, 2000)

The writer of the article, Sarah Karush, describes a scene in a Minsk courtroom where Ales Pushkin, a theater set designer and member of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), was tried for dumping a wheelbarrowful of manure on President Lukashenka's doorstep. Mr. Pushkin committed his "crime" on July 21 last year, the day after Lukashenka's term should have expired and the opposition was out celebrating that day. Asked by the writer about the meaning of his action, Mr. Pushkin replied, "Alas, this is Mr. Lukashenka's contribution to history — what was in the wheelbarrow."

The article says that with its national identity weakened by centuries of foreign domination and its recent memories of relative prosperity under the Soviets, 'Belarus is a fertile soil for a Soviet-style dictator.... Mr. Lukashenko's Soviet-style repression of democratic freedoms naturally goes hand in hand with Soviet-style repression of Belarusian culture. ... Before Mr. Lukashenko's rise, Belarusian became the official language ... Today, the Belarusian language has been subverted.'

The writer asked Lyudmila Gryaznova, a deputy in the dissolved Supreme Soviet, about the relationship between the nationalists of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and pro-democracy liberals like herself. "We are all under threat of jail and disappearances," she replied. "The three goals of the opposition — independence, democracy and market reform ó are inconceivable one without the other," she said. The writer

also met with Vincuk Viačorka, the new BPF chairman. According to the writer, to Mr. Viačorka Belarusian sovereignty is about being in the orbit of the West — and not part of a stagnating Russian empire. "Our nationalism is about an independent Belarus as part of a civilized Europe," Viacorka says. As to the coalition of nationalist and liberal forces fighting the current regime, Mr. Viačorka says they have a common cause and not just a common enemy. "In the last three years there has been a correction in the political views of other forces," he says. "Now they have no illusion that democracy will come from Moscow."

Shushkevich Enjoys Jogging in Washington (*The Washington Post*, "An Elder Statesman's Walk Through Washington," March 24, 2000)

The article reports that Stanislau Shushkevich, the former head of state of Belarus, is now an early jogger in Washington. On three-month sabbatical, he walks some 50 minutes to work at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He once visited the capital as head of state, staying at Blair House for four days. He loves walking through Georgetown, rummaging through hardware and electronics stores. As a young man, Shushkevich said he chose to become a physicist. In his native Minsk, he lectured in physics and political science.

In the three years when he was head of state, he tried to liberalize the country, he said. Since he left office in 1994, the country has moved backward and he has been in opposition and chairman of the restored and oldest party of Belarus, the Belarusan Social Democratic Party/Hramada.

"Here I know I am satisfying my own interests," he said. " I can think and write and collect articles and books to send home, so my son can understand things differently than I do. I simply know that upon my return I will not have that opportunity." Despite the richness of life here, the former leader of Belarus said he could not live here. "I can call on others to adopt free labor markets, but I am not comfortable with the idea of having to survive in them," he responded when asked whether he wished to stay.

He has been consulting with representatives of the National Endowment for Democracy to advise them on programs in Belarus, meeting with officials at the State Department and on Capitol Hill and trying to learn "effective ways of seeking assistance" for his country. He also meets regularly with members of the Belarusan community here.

Harshest Crackdown in Minsk (*The Washington Post*, "Belarusian Police Detain Protesters," March 25, 200)

The Associated Press reported, that baton-wielding police beat back thousands of protesters at an opposition rally Saturday, sending armored personnel carriers into downtown Minsk and detaining 400 people in one of the country's harshest crackdowns on dissent in recent years. The rally was held to commemorate the founding of the Belarusian Popular Republic on March 25, 1918.. Journalists also were detained as well as television crews from Russia whose cameras were smashed or damaged. Other rally participants detained were Polish Solidarity party legislator Mariusz Kaminski, and seven Polish observers with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. They were later released. Authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko praised the police actions. "Any disorder must be put to an end, and we are doing that," Lukashenko said .(Note: The same report was run by the *Los Angeles Times*)

LETTERS

European Union Position on Belarus

Mr. Prodi has well received your letter of 20 January 2000. concerning the situation in Belarus, including a copy of the spring issue of Belarusian Review.

The European Union pays great attention to developments in Belarus. We continue to press the Belarusian government to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. In the absence of a satisfactory response, we substantially scaled down relations with Belarus in 1997. On the occasion of the 17 October 1999 March of Freedom, the European Union denounced any form of violence in Belarus.

The European Union underlined that the 20 July 1999 marked the end of the first mandate of President Lukashenko, and stressed that the legitimacy of political power could only be achieved by the results of free, democratic and fair elections.

In this respect, the European Union has given full support to the start of a real political dialogue process in Belarus, sponsored by the OSCE, between the authorities, the opposition and the civil society. Such a dialogue is the only peaceful means to prepare the necessary ground for free and fair elections that the international community can recognise. President Lukashenko has committed himself to this dialogue in signing the Istanbul OSCE Summit Declaration of November 1999. On these grounds, the European Union requested that this dialogue formally starts and brings the wished results.

There is no doubt in that the European Union respects Belarus' independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. The European Union has a deep interest in a stable and democratic Belarus, soon to become its direct neighbour.

The European Union will therefore continue to monitor developments carefully and press for peaceful and democratic changes.

Timo Summa
The Director
Directorate Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Central Asian Republics
External Relations Directorate General
European Commission
Brussels, Belgium

Editor's Note: *Mr. Romano Prodi is President of the European Union Commission, the executive branch of the European Union.*

An Effective Protest

On March 18, 2000, and March 25, 2000, I had the opportunity to participate in two protests — the first in New York City and the second in Washington D.C. Of the two, the latter had the more impressive turnout, with busloads of participants coming from New Jersey, New York, and Ohio.

For the New York protest, large signs and handouts were available; the speeches were eloquent and moving. Unfortunately, the protest took place on a Saturday, in front of the United Nations building, thus onlookers were few with the exception of the cars stopped at the light located in front of the protest. I did not participate in the march to the Russian Embassy, and therefore cannot say what reaction the protestors received. However, during the initial part of the protest I discussed with a few former youth/current members of the

Belarusan American Association how to create more visibility for the protest, and the Belarusan community as well. In particular, we discussed composing postcards and a petition for distribution and/or signing at the upcoming protest in Washington, D.C. With that in mind, I drafted a petition for that protest.

The Washington protest boasted a number of Belarusan flags and a few comprehensive handouts. The large signs were better oriented toward the public, i.e., they were more general, with slogans Americans could better relate to — such as stopping the spread of Communism and/or Russian Imperialism. We circled in front of the Belarusan Embassy, and then re boarded the buses to move to the Russian Embassy. Mr. Vital Zajka — with whom we were riding — asked Ms. Alesia Kipel to lead the buses past the White House, to the Russian Embassy. Mr. Nick Bachar raised a Belarusan flag up through the sunroof of the car as we drove. The flag served a dual purpose: it allowed the buses to follow us while driving through the crowded Washington streets, and it drew pedestriansí attention to us. Several of them asked us what country the flag represented.

At the Russian Embassy the protest included short speeches and slogan shouting, and a few of us handed out leaflets. Ultimately, we were asked by the Russian guard to leave the Embassy grounds.

Overall, the Washington protest was an impressive effort. Future efforts by our group can be even more impressive. A formal decision by our various organizations and congregations to make a concerted effort to appear would provide even greater numbers of protestors. More could be done to call attention to our group. If permissible, placards could be mounted on buses and cars, flags waved from windows, as the vehicles enter the city limits. The fact that a petition or letters of protest did not issue from, or immediately follow, the protest was a lost opportunity.

Our Belarusan community exhibits weaknesses of long standing that need to be addressed. Cooperation and organization can always be improved between the various churches, between the new and old immigrations, and even within each individual entity. It seems that when I was younger, through my parents, I perceived more cooperation, involvement and appreciation of all contributions to "the cause." I appreciated that I was a member of a small but very active community. As of late, it seems that the organizations, while still dedicated to their goals, seem to be self-oriented — communication and opportunities for member involvement being limited.

Concretely, telephone trees can be established and media contacts made to voice our concerns in greater numbers to our government and media representatives. Our protests should be followed by concrete demands in the form of letters or petitions for action on the part of our government representatives.

Following the protest, I had a discussion with the editor of the *Belarusian Review* regarding the possibility of including postcards, or a petition, in the *BR* publication for interested people to sign and mail to specified contacts. As Mr. Price is involved in local government, he advised that government representatives prefer individual, even poorly drafted, letters to well written postcards. While I agree that this is preferable, I believe that it is just not happening — usually only a handful of people write when an item comes to their attention. Such contributions are sincere, but not enough to register our community as a group to be taken seriously. Many in our community are dedicated participants, but do not write for any number of reasons: lack of time, involvement in other efforts, newcomers not yet familiar enough with the English language to feel comfortable writing to government representatives, lack of information regarding government and/or media contacts. Therefore, the next best approach is to at least register our voices in numbers, even to become an annoyance rather than a non-entity. Mr. Price advises that petitions, including the signatoriesí addresses, and telegrams are seriously considered by government representatives. We can agree on a form of communication as a community, but a comprehensive method of communication should be devised and agreed upon by our various organizations. Area-specific fact sheets could be circulated to our members, providing contact names and numbers. In short, an organization of our organizations would benefit all involved regardless of our individual interests. Finally, communication and an appreciation within and among our organizations should be forthcoming if we truly expect to achieve anything on behalf of Belarus and our Belarusan American community.

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